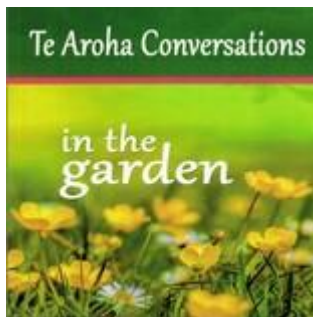


## Book Review



Sue Emms, *Te Aroha Conversations – in the garden*,  
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Over the past twenty years, ecocritical studies has become a fecund field in the humanities producing offshoots of theoretical enquiry as well as practical application. Clark (2011) and Garrard (2004) are by now ecocritical household names scrutinising literary works through a green lens. Ecocriticism has been successfully extended by Cronin (2017) to the endogenous and exogenous processes of cultural translation through literary and artistic works. The flexibility of application of this school of thought and the speed of its recent development speaks to the symbiotic relationship between the modern writer/theorist and their environment, hastened on by climate change. There is a global concern for the latter, green-reading, and an endeavour to establish a ‘natural’ literary canon now. Several universities (including but not limited to Washington, UCLA, Rice, Victoria and Essex) hold research clusters, programmes and departments the name of this concern. The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment Leadership (ASLEL, Japan) is one of several international efforts in the humanities to bring a global approach to ecocritical studies. That said, recent local literary works (as opposed those somewhat universally appreciated such as Romantic poetry) are equally impacted but critically neglected. These works are also worthy of focus since in such locally produced work, a microcosm of society can be examined. The current volume *Te Aroha Conversations - in the garden* is a response to the threat posed to nature and its healing potential by those with a great deal of hands-on involvement in it: community gardeners, artists and writers.

The small town of Te Aroha (meaning an “inland flowing of love” in Te Reo) on New Zealand’s North Island is a prime location in which to situate nature writing. Here, local artistic and conservation communities have composed a collection of stories, art, poetry, recipes, and musings, all concerned with the precious theme of gardening. *Te Aroha Conversations - in the garden* will be of interest to scholars of ecocriticism and the literary landscapes of New Zealand. The artistic contributors include Elizabeth Barton, Andrea Best and Sue Preston with Josie Ashworth, Sue Emms, Jenny Harrison, Margaret Hunter, Melanie Muenninghoff, Marie Philips, Rev Joan Ranger and Stan Wilson contributing writings. The contributors have had local, national, and international success with their writing as well as through blogging, magazines, and art works. The project was initially the brainchild of poet, library worker, columnist, and community worker Josie Ashworth. Part of the compendium’s success is its variety and warm introductory invitation to delve in to the creative works as one would put

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one's hands into the earth. Indeed, it promises that "your soul will thank you" (iv). True to the title it provides a casual conversational approach to themes, topics and features pertinent to gardening in fictional and imaginative form. In style and content, this text contains work of merit for ecocritical studies and those writing in green-ink.

There are a number of short fiction pieces in this collection devoted to wise acres, trees and human interaction with them through the generations. In a philosophical piece, "Lars" (46-47), Marie Philips writes about three different generations of a family interacting with trees. Children plant and nurture acorn and oak saplings and then tend them to a state of maturation through the trials of the elements and pasturing cows. Stan Wilson's "The Tree" (44) is seemingly spoken from a child's perspective filled with hope and insight into protecting and nurturing the roots, branches and leaves of a living creature and home to many other creatures. A picnic table beneath a chestnut tree is the setting for the narrator's curious interaction with a returning soldier on Anzac Day in "Wednesday" by Josie Ashworth (48-51). The imaginative faculties of these pieces are evoked by Elizabeth Barton's accompanying artwork of trees through the seasons (early spring 32-33; detail, early spring 45 and sketch, winter garden 52-53). These are consciously placed to match the themes of the written work as trees are described. Personified and described from youthful saplings to nascent stages, once can read of the trees' wisdom in ageing and how they are presented as the backdrop to unexpected happenings.

Another item of recurrent thematic importance is that of the scarecrow. Sue Preston (82-83) and Andrea Best (68) include some remarkable dry point engravings printed on fabric of that garden guardian. Melanie Muenninghoff's "Daily Life of a Scarecrow" is a magical short piece about a scarecrow's yearning for interaction with human beings out of loneliness. Later the scarecrow befriends a talking elf called Pearl. Sue Emms' short lyric "Inspired by a scarecrow" takes a brief and chilling glance the "silent eyes and wordless lips" (18) of this figure as it glances over the noise, calamity, and joyfulness of myna birds, sparrows and fantails invading its territory.

From imaginative content to creative stylistic expression, this collection includes some poetic pieces in haiku style such as Marie Phillips' Spring Solace (94), free verse such her poignant "The Fallen" (13) and "Te Aroha Winter." Margaret Hunter's witty narrative poem "Peace" speaks of the quietness of a still Christmas Eve in a grandmother's home (17). While the writing is succinct in general although Joan Ranger and Jenny Harrison are among some authors offering some mid-length pieces. Such an assortment of style and formal approaches within one volume is bold. The collection does maintain a germane thematic agreement despite these seemingly scattered parts that lends itself to readability. By extension, it may even be suggested that this approach in composition could have a resulting 'green therapy' approach encouraging readers to engage piecemeal with the text and its practical gardening topics to address personal healthy wellbeing and alignment with their local natural surroundings.

The book closes with some background about the community garden *Our Village Garden: Te Kete o Te Aroha* and the sustainable gardening practices and produce emanating from it since 2010. Some photographs of gardening events and creations make for a suitable sign off from this creative, practical, abstract, and applied mixture of green-thumbed writings.

One of the strengths of this collection is its philosophical and relaxed approach to gardening, conservation, and nature-related topics. It is a book in which to find comfort and insight but not a structured approach. Designed to be dipped in and out of, not read in a linear manner, this approach leans itself towards quietly and casually delving into the creative writing world just as one takes to pottering in the garden. That is to say, the lack of a structural approach has a reciprocal impact upon the readership. Readers may leisurely appreciate the aesthetics of this work and have the freedom to read it as passively and actively as one likes, much akin to the personal benefits felt by engaging in counselling. It also sets an example to the readership of community writing by skilled practitioners not necessarily inclined to the purview of the academe. Such

examples are scarcely found on the reading lists of ecocritical courses at university level but arguably are exemplar of the practical ‘green fingered’ application of ideas ensconced within literature addressing the environment.

There is something for every readership to learn here without necessarily being an expert in the mode of expression addressed, namely, creative writing, art, photography, cooking and gardening. The text makes for a fitting addition to any library, gardening association or creative writing community and should be commended for its variety and depth of insight. It also has subject matter that would interest scholars of ecocriticism examining the relationship between local artistic communities who find their genesis in natural surroundings as well as hinting at the linguistic and artistic preservation of indigenous cultures.

Rev Joan Ranger concludes her poignant piece “Seeds of Change” with the following thoughts:

*No matter your circumstances, the change you face, start planting seeds in your life, no matter how hard or how pointless it may seem right now. With a little time, patience and hard work, what now seems like an empty dirt plot will be filled with beauty and growth. (31)*

The “seeds” of inspiration for further creation is what the local Te Aroha writers, artists and gardeners have sown here. Their creative output can be cultivated and flourish in scholarly surrounds, especially in this current climate where there is a resurgence of interest in the art of gardening as the pandemic continues.

### **Acknowledgement**

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