

JESSICA BROOKS

Vanessa Berry, *Ninety 9*

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Vanessa Berry's *Ninety 9* is the seventh title published in the Giramondo short series 'of short form, short print run books'. It has been written as a kind of 'memoir' based around the band t-shirts the author wore during the 1990s and details the growth of the alternative music scene in Australia as witnessed by a lonely teenager in suburban Sydney. The publisher states that they designed the series to take into account 'the new technologies of digital printing, and to appeal to a community of literary readers'. Accustomed to photocopying on-demand print runs of her zines at a late night Kinkos, it would seem the perfect medium for Berry's foray into lengthier prose. And while it may not be ostensibly 'literary' enough for some, *Ninety 9* nevertheless depicts a significant, and often overlooked, moment in Australia's cultural (and arguably, literary) history. *Ninety 9*'s opening pages outline the emergence of grunge culture and the alternative music scene many felt was desperately needed to fill a gaping void in Australia's pop culture. '[A] shift marked by one iconic song', Nirvana's 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' became an anthem for an entire generation (and even still crowns Triple J's lists for the Hottest 100 of all time). Berry's t-shirt diary offers a detailed history of an alternative culture that also saw the growth of the underground zine scene and the emergence of a grunge trend in Australian literature – works of gritty urban realism full of sex, drugs, and attitude. It was a culture that finally gave voice to a disaffected youth: 'Alternative music seemed a place where misfits like me might belong; I felt connected with the present time in a way I never had before' (5).

Much of *Ninety 9* is about the pleasures of the lost mediums of cassette tape and VHS that allowed for eclectic recordings from the radio or late night Rage. It was an art far from the clinical perfection of MP3, CDs or digital video recording. Berry would tape compilations

from Triple J or community radio – Beasts of Bourbon, X-Ray Spex, Jane’s Addiction, Fugazi, PJ Harvey, Screamfeeder, Dead Kennedys, Babes in Toyland – ideal in their imperfections with ‘scraps of voices and the flashes of other, taped-over songs’ (35). The format of the book seems much like a mix tape itself, as it is broken into sections of different lengths which range from less than a page to fifteen or so pages long, under titles such as ‘Cassingle’, ‘Music Festival’, ‘The Mudhoney Incident’. The design of the book itself even seems to fit the theme as the matt black cover and somewhat square shape are reminiscent of a flyer for a music gig or perhaps even an oversized beer coaster. As a collage of written segments, the format also speaks to Berry’s heritage as [a](#) Zine writer, as do the ink drawings interspersed throughout. Much of the latter part of the book is dedicated to her discovery and submersion into the DIY publishing scene. Berry (who continues to author zines alongside some popular blogs) offers us a brief foray into the subversive 90s zine scene, arguably one of the original forms of social media before internet blogging and Twitter took over. Reminiscent of the small magazine culture of the Generation of ’68 poets in Sydney and Melbourne, or the infamous and eccentric London *OZ*, the 90s zine scene might be considered another important countercultural phenomenon in Australian cultural and literary history. Alongside the growth of alternative music culture, the growth of zines in the ’90s provided a voice for leftist politics and a means of ‘empowerment and opposition to mainstream media’. Most important for Berry was the fact that zines appeared to celebrate idiosyncratic individuality; in the world of zines ‘you didn’t have to suppress anything if you didn’t want to’ (73).

Although my own music taste differed from most of those mentioned above as well as others such as the Cure, and the English punk rock and Goth bands that were largely Berry’s taste as a teenager, I too remember my ‘teenage musical phases’ and the outfits that went along with them (9). So although some of the more obscure details of Berry’s ‘band t-shirt’ history may be tedious to the uninitiated, the work is nevertheless nostalgically full of the familiar. It is a story of the teenage awkwardness we all remember – a longing to belong and the interminable search for identity. I too recall daydreaming about those cooler older kids that walked by, spending hours in Pitt Street mall’s underground HMV, trawling the stalls at Glebe markets, watching late night Rage and Eat Carpet, getting dog tags engraved at Mister Minit, or fooling a parent to get to a concert, and the way in which music fests and mosh pits seemed the sole focus in life. As a teenager, ‘music was a pathway to a whole other way of being, a secret world to explore’ (6). For Berry, like so many others, music was an escape

from the isolation of suburban Sydney as band t-shirts, Goth makeup, punk jewellery and even record store bags could identify you with a particular cultural subset, like belonging to a secret tribe. Spotting a Red Eye Records bag, Berry would ‘feel a sense of kinship with whoever carried it’ (47). And while in most cases we grow out of such obsessive ‘phases’, Berry reminds us of their significance and the way in which they inevitably contribute to the complexity of our adult identity – ‘like the layers of a baboushka doll’ (139).

As a small press willing to do something a little different, Giramondo should be congratulated. This is a thoroughly interesting and eclectic series, which publishes debut authors like Vanessa Berry alongside Brian Castro and other established writers. The series’ inclusion of a popular zine writer, and its unique square format and minimalist yet striking covers, suggests it is not only attempting to appeal to a literary community looking for something new, but might also be seeking to entice a younger generation of hipsters and bloggers with attention spans more suited to short print runs of short form books.