

Arts



Young poet: Ainslee Meredith in San Francisco in July, 2011

PHOTO BY LAMBROS STAVRIAS

The poet from the east

BY ALEX PENMAN

Melbourne's east isn't known for turning out poets.

But 23-year-old, Ainslee Laura Meredith, who grew up Mooroolbark East, is steadily making waves in Melbourne's poetry scene.

Ainslee is employed by Australian Poetry, she recently earned a book deal to have a collection of works published next March, finished a thesis on poetry in April and won the 2011 John Marsden poetry prize for Young Australian Writers.

With a fiery bob cut, a pendant made out of coloured pencils dangling around her neck and her considered but confident tone, Ainslee casts a strong impression, but dig deeper and her passion for poetry is fast to match it.

"I think you need to have an unbridled and often gross love of words that is beyond any other kind of love you have sometimes," she said.

"You just have to read and read and read as that's the only way you can learn – by absorbing and stealing from other poets who have done it better than you."

In High School, Ainslee was quite isolated as no one else at her suburban High School liked poetry.

Primary School was a different story. Ainslee's first foray into the world of poetry happened at an age when most people are still reading Dr. Seuss.

"In grade two, my teacher Mrs Dinsdale had this after-school poetry club that she just ran off her own initiative, from 3.30 until 5. We wrote all kinds of poems and learned about forms," she said.

"She was despised by the other teachers, who were a bunch of horrible humourless old ladies and often when the principal left, he would turn

off the lights and the heating while we were still there – so she would make us hot chocolate in the dark.

"This is the first image I have of poetry being subversive and against authority."

To some, the idea of subversive poetry might seem an oxymoron. For Ainslee, this idea stems from poetry's antique nature. The form is not easy to read, unwieldy and doesn't always make a lot of sense.

"In that way, it's subversive against other art forms that are more easily consumable," she said.

"It requires a lot of concentration."

Before working at Australian Poetry, Ainslee spent three years as poetry editor at Voiceworks, an Australian magazine that publishes works by young writers.

"Actually having to look at someone else's poem and see what wasn't working and what was working and articulate that in a really understandable, clear and non-condescending way was the most valuable lesson I could ever have had," she said.

"It all depended so much on what the poem was doing as a whole unit.

"That was incredibly informative in teaching me about poetry and editing."

Ainslee's book deal is part of the New Voices series, which is a joint venture by Express Media and Australian Poetry. She has been assigned a mentor, a poet from Brisbane, to help her develop her manuscript.

"Her name is Sarah Holland-Batte. I'm sending my poems to her and she's editing them and she'll send them back and we'll kind of have a dialogue about not just the specific poems but the shape of the manuscript as a whole," she said.

"You need to have an unbridled and often gross love of words that is beyond any other kind of love."

"It's a selection of what I've had published over the last few years and also some poems that came out of my thesis I just finished, and then some newer poems as well."

Broede Carmody, the current poetry editor at Voiceworks Australia, described the book deal as a great achievement.

"I think this is particularly important for a young poet as it is incredibly hard to break into the publishing industry these days," he said.

"How many poets do you know who've sold as many books as J.K. Rowling?"

For Ainslee, having a book published is a necessary step in her poetry career.

"You really need to have a book to be taken seriously and also there are so many prizes and competitions that are for books of poetry, not individual poems," she said.

"With this book, I'll be able to enter more competitions and I'll be able to sell something that collects all the little things I'm doing."

She explained that poetry books today are mostly sold at readings and launches and not in book stores. And even for successful and accomplished poets, making a living from the profession is a far-sighted goal.

"I think most poets in Australia and across the

world would have another primary source of income, because even if you are successful and published, it's really, really difficult to make money," she said.

Upon completion of her book, Ainslee hopes to travel around Australia to perform readings and visit festivals.

Lambros Stavrias, Ainslee's partner, is very supportive of her work.

"I think it is a big deal for her. It's hard to have the opportunity to put out a book," he said.

"I remember her being surprised by the offer. When she put in the application, she wasn't sure she would get it. But the project itself is aimed towards young writers."

"I'd love to join her travelling around Australia, if it means she can read her works to new audiences."

Ainslee plans to study art conservation next year, as the profession will enable her to divert more attention into poetry outside of the working day and allow her to learn about new areas that will help her poetry.

"After I finish a 9 to 5 day of thinking about other people's poetry, editing and proofreading, the last thing I want to do is sit down and write my own," she said.

Beyond that, Ainslee hopes to travel more and live abroad.

"I would love to be living overseas. And that's what I plan to do once I finish my masters in Melbourne – perhaps do a PHD in conservation, somewhere," she said.

And where is this poet from Melbourne's east headed next?

"Ideally, New York."