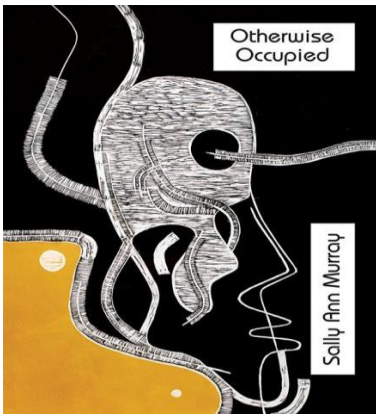


## Review of Sally Ann Murray's: *Otherwise Occupied* by Lisa Julie

Dryad Press

ISBN: 978-0-6399141-7-6

Sally Ann Murray is a South African born author. She is the current Chair of the English Department at Stellenbosch University. *Otherwise Occupied* is her third published volume of poetry; her previous collections are *Open Season* (2006) and *Shifting* (2002).



*Otherwise Occupied* questions everything that is related to the formation or the construction of “the poem”. It questions language, diction, placement, tone. It questions everything.

Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, it questions our ‘torpidity’ as readers of contemporary South African poetry. It questions our reluctance to disrupt conventions as contemporary South African writers. It questions why we as

writers are so reluctant to play, and why we as readers are so apprehensive to engage.

The collection is unique, and it is uniquely challenging. It is unapologetic. I cannot claim to know the work of the author very well. However, I do know that Sally Ann Murray has aligned her work (to a careful extent) with the works of the Language poets. The Language Poets or *L=A=N=G=A=G=E* poets (named after the magazine) were an avant-garde group (or tendency) that developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the United States. My rather scarce knowledge of the poetics of the Language poets prompted me to uniform a kind of postmodern poetics. I therefore anticipated the re-appropriation of certain words in the collection. I anticipated an emphasis on disjunction and a somewhat unusual typography. I also imagined that a lot of the content would be moderately feminist.

But then I read “Body Works” (p. 25-26) and I am struck by the balance of humour and emotion driven by lyric. I read “Husband and Wife” (p. 27) and I am struck by the conviction (the sheer conceivability) of the unfolding narrative. And then I ask myself, how does one write across all poetic genres with such fearlessness? As a writer, I suppose this is a question for my own contemplation.

However, Sally Ann Murray goes beyond the idea of illustrating the potential of language. For many, the structure, the form, and the general aesthetic of the collection seems forced. As a literary scholar, I naturally questioned the poet's decisions regarding placement and form. In other words, I questioned why an entire stanza should be italicised or indented. In "Life Support" (p.23) I questioned the poet's decision to place 2D shapes in front of the text. However, I do believe that this is where the power of the individual poems and the collective project lies. It demands a certain level of engagement. It activates the role of the reader. It places equal weight on language and on placement. It places equal weight on the role of the speaker and the reader.

At first glance, I suspected a book of "serious" poems in tone and in content and perhaps this was because of the title. Instead, Sally Ann Murray has produced a collection that demonstrates the contrary. Her poems demonstrate her ability to be 'otherwise'. It is a demonstration of artistry.