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thank goodness it's friday



BOOKS - PAT CANDLISH

Poems seek to celebrate wonder of nature at work

DOG LATIN by Norman Morrissey (Empangeni: Echoing Green Press, R80).
Reviewed by **CATHAL LAGAN.**

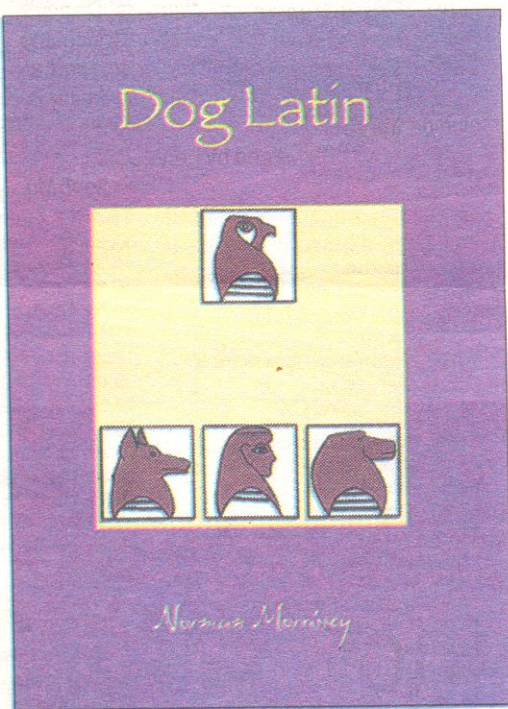
NORMAN Morrissey, academic, poet and naturalist, comes from Pietermaritzburg. After many years "on the road", job commitments finally brought him to the Eastern Cape (he taught at Fort Hare for 18 years) and, in retirement, to Hogsback.

He brings to his poetry a harvest of experience and reflection, a wide reading in literature and mythology, and the trained eye of an observer of nature. This volume of poetry *Dog Latin* shows the continuities of thought and feeling possible to a mind relatively settled, but also the tensions of time and place, as in his opening poem, *Settler Country*: there's "no inch of land that's not a border /settler country".

Yes, here's no Eden, but his verse seeks to celebrate, where it can, the wonder at work in nature to save and sustain. In *Old Spice*, for example, "A stand of trees know when one of them's in trouble", and the title poem is a delightful, humorous reflection on birds ganging up against a snake.

Then, warning in *Made of Things* about the growing threat of loss to animal life and environment, Morrissey reflects ironically: "think of what we'll have made of things/by the time/we're à bit older!". The ego is hammered here, playing second fiddle to "proxies". The poem of that name evokes "one of my proxies/(hawk, cat, snake, hound)/ that think / where I've no mind of my own."

No place here for the egotistical sublime - perhaps the egotistical subliminal? In poem after poem, the poet's voice is taken over in a surrender of sorts, a mutual reciprocity where outer and inner



unite in what Buddhist philosopher Ken Wilber calls "One Taste". Examples are in *Without Them and Them Too*, which deserves more than the fleeting comment here: the poet, caught in a mountain storm, finds himself in drenched solidarity with baboons, who also have to watch out the night for dawn. The poem ends "and if prayer is the shiver of thanks cold bones give the dawn/baboons pray too." Morrissey's poems are disciplined by his love for the haiku (see his *Seasons*, published in 1999). Many stand mid-page, short terse lines pruned to serve the need for looking within.