

THE WITNESS

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 5, 2011

10

ARTS: BOOKS

A rich collection of poetry

BOOK REVIEW

Home from Home
New and selected poems:
Chris Mann
Echoing Green Press

CHRIS Mann is a well-known and much lauded South African poet. His latest publication, *Home from Home*, contains both new work and familiar, often anthologised material. Mann's work reflects a writer sensitive to the physical, social and political environment, to the natural world, to his fellow humans and to those invisible others, the shades.

Like any person whose tools are words, Mann goes through life "Wording along. / Worded upon." (*A midlands Lexicon*); and conscious of "new noun(s) stomping into my lexicon." (*Dicynodont*). In *Poet*, he outlines his youthful ideal to take poetry to the people and voices the mature realisation that he, like most poets, is read essentially by "scholars, poets, friends". Nevertheless, he hopes that he and his "fellow word-smiths" may have the power to stir the "selving souls" of readers "into life".

While the inspiration for most of the poems comes from the experience of daily living in a country both stimulating and provocative, a few of the pieces are rooted in works of art. Most notable of these is *The Road to Emmaus*, based on the painting by Caravaggio, written as a monologue by one of the

travellers and reminiscent (in voice and tone) of Eliot's *Journey of the Magi*. The speaker's conclusion that "it's travelling in readiness for Emmaus [i.e. for revelation] that counts" would seem to be central to Mann's thinking, both as spiritual being and poet.

The poems, characterised by concision, striking imagery and occasional rhyme, are wide-ranging in subject matter and reflect the poet's individual observations, experiences, concerns and insights. Sometimes a poem makes the potentially ephemeral,

memorable; sometimes it contains unique vision arising from keen observation; sometimes the poem, as a verbal structure, becomes "a word-carved talisman" (*Rhinoceros*) or even a "small cathedral" (*A Poem to Christ near Winchester*); sometimes familiar/ordinary activities, treated with poetic sensibility, give rise to profundities — games of cricket, for example,

evoke thoughts on evolution and perceptions of time — "I long to walk out on the grass / And make time cricket time again." Inevitably and frequently, issues South African, past and present, become the focus.

Mann argues for faith, love and respectful coexistence, as he works with words, recognising both their immense potential and frustrating limitations.

This is an extensive and rich collection, which enthusiasts of Mann's work will welcome.

Moira Lovell

