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The small town with a big potato that inspired a global poetry win

Robertson might be tiny but for poet and schoolteacher Peter Ramm, it is the secret weapon that helped him win the UK's biggest prize for unpublished poetry

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Robertson is a small, pretty town perched on the edge of the New South Wales southern highlands, almost teetering on the escarpment that falls away to the Illawarra and Shoalhaven coasts.

It is most famous as the home of The Big Potato - an appropriately tuber-shaped concrete monolith on the main street - and a triumphant rugby league team called the Spuddies.

That might appear to put it culturally a long way from the poetry lounges and literary events of the city, where emerging writers rub shoulders with established ones, giving new voices the chance to hone their craft and make crucial connections.

But according to the rising poet Peter Ramm, it is Robertson (and other beautiful and more remote parts of Dharawal and Gundungurra country) that is in fact his secret weapon.

“I love being regional because that’s the countryside that I write,” says Ramm, who grew up in the southern highlands. “I can go for a walk for five minutes and be in the paddocks or in the Robertson rainforest.”

That particular patch of untouched cool climate rainforest is known as the Yarrawa Brush, which in a few steps takes walkers from a regular country road into a dark, mysterious, gloriously tangled otherworld.

It is the setting for one of Ramm’s best poems, *The Rainforest in Winter*, which along with two others (*Pantheon in Three Parts*, and *Two Sijo and Tanka in Autumn*; or the *Steel City Gardens*) last month secured him the prestigious Manchester poetry prize, the UK’s biggest prize for unpublished poetry.

In the last week in May he travelled to England for three days knowing only that he was a finalist, but thinking it was a once in a lifetime opportunity to read his work at Manchester Metropolitan University.

When his name was called out as the winner of the £10,000 prize, he sat frozen for a moment in his seat.

“It took me a few seconds to get out of my chair - I didn’t think I had a chance,” Ramm says. “Poetry is one of those things where you get rejected so many times that that becomes the default position.”

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The Manchester judges, meanwhile, were raving about him, describing his work as “contemporary poetry at its best”.

“We the judges were delighted with the sublime poetics, where the poet’s language cartwheels with lyrical dexterity,” the poet and judging panel chair Malika Booker said.

“Each poem in this submitted portfolio pulsated and bewitched us judges into reciting lines to each other, while luxuriating in the musicality of the language, and the richness and beauty portrayed.

“Ordinary domestic scenes between a family walking or driving were explored against a boisterous natural backdrop, where nature pulses with panoramic vitality.”

Ramm’s win caps off what in some areas of the arts you might call a “spectacular rise” for the 35 year old. Until 2016, he had not written a poem since high school, although his passion for words had been nourished by his work as an English and history teacher at Cedars Christian College in the Illawarra.



 Peter Ramm stands by a stone fence outside of Robertson. Photograph: Blake Sharp-Wiggins/The Guardian

It was a student poetry competition run by the Red Room Company, which featured a category for teachers, that gave him the impetus to have a go as an adult, primarily so students could see that “even teachers make mistakes” and gain confidence from Ramm’s own stop-start progress.

“That poem made the shortlist,” he says. “I thought, ‘That’s nice, next year I’ll enter again.’ So I put two in and one of them won.”

Ramm had been a sporty kid, excelling at state level in a number of disciplines, until a devastating diagnosis of rheumatoid arthritis in his early 20s. But this early success whetted his competitive appetite.

The 2017 Red Room judge had been Mark Tredinnick, one of Australia’s most successful modern poets and a teacher of some renown, who also calls the southern highlands home.

Ramm joined Tredinnick’s continuing education class at the University of Sydney and then entered into a paid mentorship with him.

“He had what every poet needs – one, voice; two, place. But he needed to learn craft,” Tredinnick recalls.

“Peter was at the right stage – he’d already written a number of poems that needed architectural, sculptural help, and needed rhythm.”

Tredinnick points out that, even with his advantages, it is still remarkable to go from the poems Ramm was writing in 2018 to winning the Manchester prize.

“A poet’s work should be slow, or rather deep, and [despite the speed of his success] he’s worked deeply,” he says. “He’d been reading deeply for a long time. He’s made huge strides.”

But even with such high praise, in the quiet, often overlooked world of poetry, it is hard to get the kind of recognition and attention that a major international prize would pull in other realms.

Almost as hard to achieve is a publishing contract, which Ramm managed to score with Vagabond Press. His collection of poems, *Waterlines*, is set to be launched on 6 August in Robertson. Despite his belief in his work and his growing profile, he has no expectation it will take the bestseller charts by storm.

“(Poet) Felicity Plunkett said to me, ‘Many more people want to write poetry than read it...If we could only get people to buy more poetry, the whole scene could thrive’,” Ramm said.

It also remains a city-centric activity, despite Zoom bringing poetry lounges online during the pandemic.

“The editors, the gatekeepers, live in the city and think you’ve fallen off the face of the earth if you’re not there,” Tredinnick says. “You have to work a little bit harder to make your presence felt.”

But the upside, according to both Tredinnick and Ramm, is the advantage of looking at the world “from the margins”.

“The liminal is a very wealthy place for art,” said Tredinnick.

For Ramm, his connection to the country of his childhood is primary. The church camps at Tuena on the Abercrombie River, or summers at his grandfather’s place at Currarong, are the launching point for his work, as he attempts to weave the inner and outer landscapes together.

“I often start with places, with moments,” he says. “Poems often take you in a direction you don’t expect, and that’s the joy of it.

“In writing I’ll discover the emotions that are often subconscious, the feelings I didn’t know I had.”

This article was amended on 22 June 2022. The Manchester poetry prize is awarded by Manchester Metropolitan University, not the University of Manchester.

Waterlines is available now through Vagabond Press.

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