Opening the fridge

Bystanders and helpers

Miriam Cosic

EMPATHY: A HANDBOOK FOR REVOLUTION
by Roman Krznaric
Rider Books, $34.99 pb, 288 pp, 9781846043840

When I was a child, comparing the behaviour of two people in my circle was formative. One would turn out to help in any situation, from raking dirt on the local school oval in a working bee to stopping the car late at night to check on an old man hanging over the rail at a city tram stop. He never talked much about these actions, nor dramatised the recipients' needs, beyond saying, if asked, that it was the 'right thing to do'. The other person would become so upset by other people's troubles, and *feel* their pain so intensely, that she would end up a teary, hand-wringing mess and require calming herself, taking away attention and care from the person in need.

As I learned to define these behaviours, the former's was sympathetic, the latter's empathetic, and it was clear which should be emulated. The sympathetic person retained enough emotional distance to assess the situation coolly and help. The empathetic person became too involved in her own emotional reaction to offer any assistance at all. One could clearly empathise too much. I couldn't see how one could sympathise too much.

Now here comes Roman Krznaric's new book to turn my understanding on its head. For Krznaric, sympathy is about superiority: pity or feeling sorry for suffering is not the motivating emotion that turns a bystander into a helper, but rather a patronising response. Empathy, by contrast, is about actively imagining yourself into the sufferer's situation and thus acting in their interests as you would for your own. Note: in *their* interests and not what your own would be in that situation. He quotes George Bernard Shaw: 'Do not do unto others as you would have them do unto you – they may have different tastes.' It is empathy, and learning to act upon empathy, imaginatively and in solidarity, that will lead us into a better world.

Early in his introduction, Krznaric discusses a young American product designer, Patricia Moore, whose career path changed drastically when, fresh out of college in the 1970s, she asked a simple question in her first job. Couldn't a refrigerator be designed so that someone with arthritis would find it easy to open? Her colleagues were dismissive. Piqued, she conducted a first-person experiment. She had herself made up with layers of latex to appear old, and was trussed and splinted so movement was difficult. She dressed frumpily, wore uneven shoes and carried a walking stick to help her hobble along. Everything became almost insurmountably difficult: using subway stairs, negotiating crowded buses, crossing streets on the walk sign, using tin openers, and, yes, opening fridge doors.

This was an act of radical experiential empathy: she didn't just imagine what it meant to be old, struggling physically, and ignored; she learned directly. Moore went on to carve out a successful career as a product designer specialising in products for people with physical limitations, became an expert in gerontology, a campaigner for the rights of the elderly, and was instrumental in getting the *Americans with Disabilities Act* (1990) passed. This, says Krznaric, was a triumph of empathy at work.

As the subtitle suggests, his book is not a merely theoretical account. After the introduction, he has six substantive chapters, each dwelling on an empathetic habit worth forming. It is written in the style of self-help manuals, but Krznaric's aim is not the introspection required for 'self-development' but the very opposite. He recommends 'outrospection' instead: 'discovering who you are and how to live by stepping outside yourself and exploring the lives and perspectives of other people.' Empathy is the 'essential art form for the Age of Outrospection'.

In the chapter titled 'Habit 2: Make the Imaginative Leap', Krznaric tackles the psychological obstacles that block empathy: prejudice, authority, distance, and denial. Under prejudice, he examines stereotypes and the way politicians can recast language, so that, for example refugees – people legally seeking asylum under the UN Convention – can become 'illegals' to suit a political narrative. 'What all stereotyping has in common,' Krznaric writes, 'whether it is a product of politics, religion, nationalism or other forces, is an effort to dehumanise, to erase individuality, to prevent us from looking someone in the eye and learning their name.'

Other habits he suggests we cultivate include going out of our way to seek adventures that bring us into contact with different cultures and learning to really connect with people, to find out about what matters to them and not stick to well-worn conversational paths. He suggests we play 'imaginative character games' when we encounter others: imagining a tough businessman met at a conference playing joyfully with his three-year-old son, or the creative talents a sulky teenager may have hidden behind her pout. His final chapter includes a reading list of empathy-inducing books, a list of suitable websites, and exercises for swapping one's own comfort zone for other people's sometimes challenging ones.

The book is more discursive than this may sound. Krznaric traces the paths of people who made empathetic immersion a professional priority, for example: from political figures such as Mahatma Gandhi to artists and writers such as Daniel Day-Lewis, who portrayed the Irish writer and cerebral palsy sufferer, Christy Brown, in the film *My Left Foot*, and George Orwell, who lived rough before writing *Down and Out in*

Paris and London in the 1930s. He also describes the work of writers such as Polly Toynbee in Britain and Barbara Ehrenreich in the United States, who went undercover to grasp the plight of impoverished workers, and Günter Wallraff in Germany, who disguised himself as a Turkish immigrant working menial jobs.

Some of the book seems a little obvious, such as the chapter devoted to explaining how literature enhances empathy. The point of fiction has always been to suspend readers' disbelief to the point where they are submerged in radically different worlds from their own. That suspension of disbelief inevitably draws us into the lives, the milieu, even the moral universe, of people unlike ourselves. Other inclusions in the book – the author's own inventions for enhancing empathy, such as special cafés for meeting strangers or acting workshops to guide role playing – smack of his involvement with the flaccid projects of Alain de Botton's School of Life.

One may also quibble with Krznaric's interpretations of theory and occasional confusions in his argument. Early in the book, for example, he repeatedly refers to Adam Smith as the author of *The Wealth of Nations*, the bible for hard-hearted self-interest, ignoring Smith's other great work, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, an account of the sympathy for others that people spontaneously feel and the social mechanisms those feelings prompt and maintain. Then he springs the lesser-known book on us, calling it 'probably the first handbook on the art of empathizing'. (Smith, of course, called it 'sympathy' and described with empirical precision the need for carefully controlled calibration of our sympathetic responses.)

Krznaric didn't change my view of the empathy–sympathy divide. What seems lacking in his argument is a clear sense of boundaries. And boundaries must be clear when we act on empathy, not only to preserve the integrity of one's self, but to allow proper respect for others: to understand when reaching out becomes an imposition, for example.

French neuroscientist Jean Decety describes four essential elements of empathy: shared affect; the mental ability to put oneself in the other's shoes; awareness that other people are separate from oneself; and the emotional regulation to produce an appropriate response. In other words, if you find yourself screaming, heart thumping out of control, when your friend injures himself with a carpentry tool, you won't have the presence of mind to calm him, ring Emergency, and bind the wound while you wait.

Empathy is not as well organised or as clearly written as Krznaric's previous book, *The Wonderbox* (2011), a cultural history brimming with interest and a sustained exercise in empathy in itself. The new book will divide readers into those who find it inspiring and those who find it overly sentimental. And yet, the need for empathy, even more than sympathy, will become more urgent as globalisation brings increasingly chill winds into the lives of those of us who have lived comfortably in the West, as global warming increases competition for the world's resources, and as technology increasingly disconnects us from the living, breathing reality of people around us. Krznaric's book could help fast-forward the discussions we will have to have. ■

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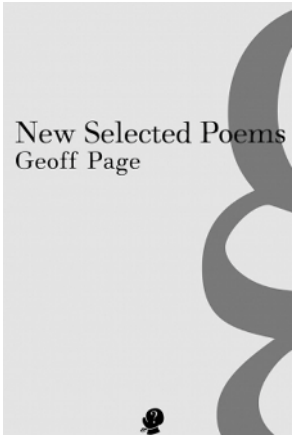
Tighter turns

Dennis Haskell

NEW SELECTED POEMS
by Geoff Page
Puncher & Wattmann
$29.95 pb, 301 pp, 9781922186454



Twenty pages from the end of his *New Selected Poems*, Geoff Page imagines being 'an heir of Whitman', and muses that 'I think I could turn awhile and write like the Americans, / they are so at ease in their syllables, irregular as eyelids, / various as the sea'. These lines are so cleverly Whitmanesque that the idea seems momentarily plausible. Only an astute reader will stop to think that the sea is hardly various at all – and how irregular are eyelids? Page's poem, we *might* realise by this stage of the book, is presenting wry, understated humour, and this is one way in which he seems a deeply Australian poet, utterly unlike the Americans.

In the second part of the poem he admits as much, knowing that 'somehow after / half a book' he 'would … turn back'. Page would 'feel the need for / tighter turns' and the poem ends with 'something / leaner, drier' and 'lower-key' – a summer on the / Clarence maybe …' These are good descriptions of Page's voice, and New England's Clarence River runs through all his poems like the sacred river Alph through Xanadu, a beloved undercurrent even when it is not mentioned.

Page's lines are characteristically lean, dry, and short; his true American referent is not Whitman but that other big 'W', William Carlos Williams. Both Page and Williams write a gentle, reader-friendly poetry which values life's surfaces – more Thomas Hardy (or Bruce Dawe) than Wordsworth (or Les Murray), and providing depth of thought as it emerges from an unpretentious observer's meditations on the things of ordinary life.

Page is a great observer, a flâneur of both the city and the country, so it is no surprise that *New Selected Poems* includes many diverse portraits. These in-