



Book Recommendation

You Don't Need a Weatherman by Chris O'Connor

I met the author of this book, at a Melbourne Books evening, 10th December 2024 at which David Tenenbaum and team were celebrating their published authors of the year. As a fellow author of Melbourne Books, I take this opportunity to foster and appreciate another author on their exciting entry into the world of publication.

O'Connor's book is a lovely homage to Bob Dylan, a known and iconic music artist, who has been loved and derided in turn over the long course of his creative life. When Dylan was the recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2016, there was divided opinion about what constituted Literature and how Bob Dylan could possibly qualify as a recipient.

O'Connor constructs a compelling case for Dylan's worthiness. I personally enjoyed the journey very much through the musical stages of Dylan's life which O'Connor conducts. His sub-title, Bob Dylan for Beginners is apt and modest. It is apt because his book does not presuppose any prior knowledge of Dylan and therefore it is most accessible, and modest as I personally delighted in many of O'Connor's insights which reveal a depth of appreciation and understanding of his subject.

Given my own background as an English teacher, it is not surprising that I enjoyed the way O'Connor referred to Dylan's musical influences belonging as much to the poets as to country and folk music: 'His writing has been influenced by the country sounds of Hank Williams and the folk protest of Woody Guthrie as much as by poets such as T. S. Eliot, William Blake and Arthur Rimbaud or even Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac.' He includes a wonderful paradoxical quote from Eliot: 'Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood.'

I particularly like the detailed appreciation of O'Connor's analysis of songs, examples of which are, 'The changes of rhyme pattern and rhythm keep you waiting to see where the next emphasis will come and seem to keep the righteous anger just barely below the surface' and this: 'The title track, 'Slow Train', is another of the highlights, using the rhyming scheme ABCCBD plus an internal rhyme in the first line of most verses. Some of the rhymes are beautifully audacious, rhyming 'negotiators' with 'women haters,' 'realistic' and 'statistic,' 'proposition' and 'religion', 'companions' and 'abandon'.



Indeed, I greatly enjoyed also O'Conner making accessible many comments by other notable commentators, that I had not, nor was likely to encounter, such as this one from Leonard Cohen, 'Bob Dylan can't sing in the same way as Picasso can't paint.' This witty comment rewardingly reveals much to me about Cohen's perspicacity as it does of Dylan's voice. There is also this from Bruce Springsteen, 'he [Dylan] was a revolutionary man, the way that Elvis freed your body, Bob freed your mind.' Again, thank you O'Conner for including such arresting and fresh comments which entertain and enlighten.

Dylan, as a truly original thinker, and artist with integrity, emerges strongly in this book. I particularly appreciated reading Dylan's own words in which he shows determination to throw off the expectations of those who wanted him to play the game the way they thought he should. In 1964-5 Dylan said, 'I don't want to write for people anymore, you know, be a spokesman...From now on I want to write from inside me.' For some, it might have been easy to be derailed by the iconic status that was conferred upon Dylan, the extent of which is shown in this astonishing fact included by O'Connor: 'In September 1965, Esquire magazine has a composite face on its cover: one quarter Malcolm X, one quarter John F. Kennedy, one quarter Fidel Castro and one quarter Bob Dylan'; not so, Dylan. Despite this extraordinary notoriety, Dylan was writing and continued to write for what he needed to express; he was not motivated or influenced by the demands of that zeitgeist. The title quote: 'You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows', beautifully reflects Dylan's reluctance to be the cult figure, to abjure responsibility for other's awarenesses, to invite all of us to read the signs for themselves, as he does.

Dylan's precocious awareness and authenticity is made evident as O'Connor writes: 'When the 19-year-old Bob Dylan arrived in New York City, he realised that he could be whoever he wanted to be and throughout his artistic career it seems he kept believing (whether consciously or subconsciously) that he could continue to be whoever he wanted to be, despite the expectations of those around him.'

O'Connor concludes his book with the definitive statement:

'Neither Dylan nor any other singer is ever likely to have the same cultural impact as Dylan did in the 1960's. Nevertheless, many of his works are timeless and his new and old material alike will continue to touch and move and challenge and confound and stimulate and provoke and inspire us for generations yet to come'.



O'Connor piques this reader's interest to track back into the songs themselves, to use his insights as guide and companion, to listen to Dylan anew. That has to be the measure of a valuable addition to the existing works on a cultural icon. Job well done, Chris O'Connor.

The decision as to Dylan's worthiness of the Nobel Literature prize, is yours to make. O'Connor's decision is clear.