

Reviews featured in *Poetry Nottingham* magazine (now called *Assent*).

Coral by Martin Stannard. Leafe Press. £2.50

Leafe Press now have a baker's dozen in their range of slim pamphlets introducing us to the work of a diverse selection of poets, some of whom have not been in print for a while. Martin Stannard does not fit this profile but the Leafe format is perfect for his collection *Coral*, a sequence of poems that is distinctive and experimental in nature.

Regulars will have noticed Martin's long poem in the winter issue of this magazine. Entitled 'POEM (I'm at home this evening)', it is written in real time over three consecutive evenings, at home. This quirky concoction seems to be daring us to approach it too seriously as it flicks off the safety catch and fires out indiscriminate bursts of one-liners and non-sequiturs with semi-automatic abandon. He even warns us:

....You know I expect you

not to take all this at face value, to examine it from all sides

like the inquisitor you have it in you to be.

We need to bear this caveat in mind when reading *Coral* because at first sight it appears to be issuing exactly the same challenge. The title itself seems to be a deliberate misnomer, implying slow, painstaking accretion, when all the poems in the sequence have an improvised, spontaneous quality. There are eighteen poems listed in the contents though the final, and best one, *Curriculum Vitae* really does not belong. This is a Stannard classic, listing over thirty job titles of varying degrees of craziness. Of course he knows it doesn't really fit and the cheeky inclusion of '*Ornamenter de Chloe*' in the list as a deliberately contrived link admits as much.

To explain the link, all but one of the remaining poems are addressed in an absurdly melodramatic, almost burlesque style to the mysterious 'Chloe'. Add to this a plethora of parentheses, quotation marks, italics and an abuse of French that would embarrass Derek Trotter and you begin to get an idea of what he is up to:

Chloe, I couldn't make this evening

I had to work late (*J'ai du travailler tard*)

& when separate things
keep saying they're determined to remain
separate perhaps Chloe
you simply ought to accept it

The intriguing thing about this collection is that we get a rare glimpse of Martin dipping a toe into in fiction. The scenes and characters, including the protagonist, are all inventions. There are two additional female characters, Daphne and Diana, who both appear to be regarded by Chloe as rivals for the narrator's affections. These little dramas are mostly enacted on a set with a botched fantasy aristocratic backdrop. He talks of bedchambers, antechambers, stables, rolling grasslands and most poems seem to mention horses. It's definitely green wellie territory. You get hooked. You begin to take a compulsive interest in these eccentric lives as each episode unravels. That's right, Martin Stannard has invented a whole new genre, the Poetry Soap, unreality T.V. *Pride and Prejudice* collides with *Emmerdale* and shoots right off the literary Richter scale!

Of course, if this collection is about anything, it is about poetry itself. Its mission is to remind poets to always read the label and check their ingredients for artificial colours and flavouring. Entertaining and elegant, it is Martin Stannard is at his satirical best, warning us to keep at least one foot on the ground at least some of the time, emphasising the importance of not being earnest.

Swimming Lessons by Sally Festing. Hawthorn Cidesterna £6.95

Breakfast With Sylvia by Kevin Kiely Lagan Press £7.95

The subtitle of Sally Festing's chapbook is 'A sequence of poems in the voice of Mother and Daughter.'

It starts off encouragingly enough with a good solid, moody, atmospheric poem, 'House of Waiting.' Set in Ontario, it cleverly contrasts the limitless geography of Canada with the claustrophobia of the writer's 'backyard' domesticity and that of her scary neighbour. This poem does a decent job; it sets the scene, produces the daughter, and has some unusual lines, particularly the last two:

First Christmas we hung a bird out
the window, a slice kept us going for weeks.

'Crossing the Border' and 'Snow Child' maintain this taut, frontier edginess and a daughter poem 'The Fly Screen' is in a similar vein. And then, just as the scene has been so carefully constructed, Canada vanishes. This is a shame. The collection would have benefited from several more poems in this context before leaving North America. Suddenly we are in a ballet class in the Methodist Church Hall. It's a clumsy, anticlimactic shift and the book suffers for it, sagging badly in the mid-section. It loses the narrative quality of the opening and feels directionless.

This problem is exacerbated by the daughter poems. A quarter of the thirty or so poems are written from the viewpoint of the poet's daughter. Most of them are unconvincing. They fail to establish any sort of a dialogue with the mother, they offer limited insight into the daughter and few of them can be said to be in her 'voice.' 'The Fly Screen' for instance opens:

Play she says as if play is something I can conjure.

Hardly the voice of a small child, who goes on to say:

It's 90 degrees in our corrugated shack
and she needs to be alone.

We have the child's viewpoint here but surely not her words. This failing occurs in most of the daughter poems. Only in 'Woundplug', harking back to North America, and 'Earthdream', beaming us down in Australia, is a credible voice established. These are interesting poems that go walkabout in a pre European world. If they are indeed daughter poems they are more successful, given that they are the voice of

a much older child. In both we get the first hints of someone failing, sinking rather than swimming, wanting to escape from a world in which they cannot cope:

I'm all air. I can't be hugged,

My ribs get crushed.

It's how I am.

I plug my wounds.

Without a plug I would be lost.

(Woundplug)

These two poems presage another sudden shift for the second half of the sequence.

It is as dramatic as it is unexpected:

*I'm bound to lose weight, I'm starving cancer. She can't admit
for years she'd wanted a reason
to get so thin.*

(Magic Beans)

The gloves come off and the next few poems are unnervingly frank:

Bored with waiting, she spread around
the lumps were mushrooming.
Next day she confessed
she'd overplayed the alarm.

(Little Teaser)

So starving's fun?
Like Cowboys and Indians. Bang-Bang
and as you're still alive, you'll try again.

(Playing Games)

When Sylvia Plath writes in this fashion about her attempts on her own life it has a chillingly appropriate sense of irony. To write about someone else like this seems chillingly inappropriate, especially if it's your own daughter, yet you have to admire Sally Festing's courage.

The final four poems have an elegiac quality, the anger extinguished with the life of her child:

I'm not a patient person.

I showed her the creek's cradle,
did what I could.

I acknowledged her echo of me.

She won't hear bittern or curlew,
feel sand bite to bone.

I stare at the marsh alone.

(Tides)

Swimming Lessons is a brave collection. Sally Festing is disarmingly honest about feelings most of us would prefer not to own up to. As a sequence it does hold together despite some rather clunky changes of gear. Even though the daughter poems are generally less successful, there is still value in this alternative perspective, particularly that of the older child. Sally Festing's candid expression of the feelings of frustration and rage that a parent can be driven to is one that many, if we are honest, can identify with. It forces us to face up to the fact that as parents, to some extent at least, most of us are not bathing but drowning.

In sharp contrast with 'Swimming Lessons', which has the look and feel of a parish magazine, Kevin Kiely's 'Breakfast with Sylvia' is a lovely looking book. We all know we shouldn't judge them by the cover, though we do, and this one is gorgeous: full colour on a nice quality silk art board with matt lamination to the face, it displays a superb modern seascape by Maeve McCarthy called 'The Shelter'. Colour, line and perspective are all beautifully executed, with the title and author tastefully superimposed just above the centreline and the foot. Inside we have 64 pages of crisp bulky woodfree cartridge paper, a perky little serif font, Garamond I'm guessing, beautifully typeset and arranged on the page, perfect bound and neatly three knife trimmed. It gladdens the heart of the graphic designer; it quickens the pulse of the litho printer.

The back cover boasts a trio of Irish big hitters who huff and puff about the man and his work. They use words like 'intriguing' and 'invigorating' but they are all careful to avoid saying that the poems

are any good. No wonder. Not many poems in this stylishly presented collection can be said to be genuinely worthy of publication. As the blurbers point out, there is plenty of variety but as fast as the poet introduces new themes, he fails to realize them. Kiely writes about sex but is never erotic, he sketches landscapes but is not painterly, he mentions Buddhism but is not spiritual. Some poems have a good verse or two but seldom sustain this level of writing all the way through. Thus early in the title poem

the face by turns, almond pale and fire bright
a streak of lip paint on the brilliant teeth
she eyes the menu in a seething force-nine rage

(Breakfast with Sylvia Plath)

This is a promising start, but the poem fails to build on it and falls apart almost immediately, petering out quite disastrously at the end. In fact most of the poems just seem to just fizzle out, apart from one which ends

I am fine thinking of you tonight
The full moon's a photo developing its face
And long to hear you
And sit across from you

(Yesterday She Read Coleridge to Me)

Sadly the only good thing about this poem is the ending, which is preceded by two pages of random babble most of which fails to arrest the eye, with the possible exception of the line:

O matchless one, smoking or non-smoking

a line which line suggests I may be missing irony and humour in this poem. If I am, it is not for want of trying to find it.

Kiely's use of anticlimax can be equally challenging. One of the poems I do like, 'Overnight' ends with these three lines

as we swayed in pleasure, mouths like bitten apples
riven bodies shocked releasing the fears of life
before a bath

That's it. That's how it ends. I'm out of my depth here.

Another more successful poem 'The Inistioque Mood' uses anticlimax in a more understandable way. This well paced and constructed poem develops and sustains an atmosphere of lack of fulfilment with gentleness and subtlety

your sideways gaze as you stretch out and yawn
when you close your eyes
my lost opportunity is not so sharp
as I fumble out of clothes
towering backwards with the second sock
in a merry whooshing through
childhood Christmases

Kiely is at his best when dealing with frustrated hopes and thwarted ambition. 'Siren' is another successful poem in a similar vein.

There are, however, far too many poems in this collection which simply do not work. Flicking through its pages I notice an Arts Council logo tucked away near the front like a discrete tattoo. You have to ask yourself whether it is really a good idea to enable a substandard collection like this to don its designer jacket and be punted out onto the market like a fake Rolex. People who buy it are likely to feel disappointed and Poetry plc will ultimately have to pick up the tab for that.

Nearly The Happy Hour by D.A. Prince. Happenstance Press. £8.00.

The Glass Swarm by Peter Bennett. Flambard Press £7.50

Listening to the Radio 4 lit quiz recently I discovered that J.K. Rowling does not have a middle name. Having been advised that she would reach a wider audience if her gender were not revealed, she borrowed the K from her Gran. You could say it was quite successful.

On the evidence of this, her first full collection, I suspect gender neutrality is not the reason why the popular local writer D.A. Prince sails under a flag of convenience. If the pleasing patchwork quilt illustration on the front cover is not enough to give the game away, the title of the first poem 'Writing Just About Parsley' certainly is. This is unashamedly feminine poetry, and none the worse for that.

We don't spend all the time in the kitchen, however. There are many finely observed poems about birds, particularly water birds, and painters are clearly a significant influence, as in 'Seen from the Train.'

No face. Her hair was – what? Already

you've had Hopper in, making her flat as paint.

The focus of the collection is primarily domestic and the home in question often the writer's childhood one, viewed through the eyes of that child. We inhabit the frugal home economy of pre-consumer England, saving the string, nothing wasted. But this is not a rose-tinted lens, sometimes you sense it is misted by tears. The title of the collection gives us a clue here, 'Nearly' being the operative word. There is plenty of good old nostalgia but it is tempered with hints of disappointment. Particularly powerful is 'Marriage Bed,' referenced by the cover image, about a young woman, her Mother perhaps, . . . stitching his love letters across/ the honeymoon cotton of a double quilt.

The poem concludes,

No-one laughs at love, how it takes over,

how his words flow across the cotton.

She soaks her hands' meat in the salt

of commitment, ignoring the blood.

'Not Even in Colour' evokes a similar this mood of dissatisfaction and lack of fulfilment.

Overlying these difficulties however is an attitude of tolerance, forbearance and above all gentleness, to the extent that even a poem called *The Pig-Killing Knife*, vegetarians look away now, which you would expect to be rather gruesome, has a delicate brutality that is calm and measured without being sentimental.

This charming collection will sustain us as we all wait with fortitude for our elusive Happy Hours to finally begin.

In contrast with the intensely personal writing of Davinia Prince, Peter Bennet is a storyteller who reinvents the world each time he writes, with fabulous imaginations and lashings of irony. There is such a breadth of subject matter and style in this collection that it is impossible to sum it up neatly packaged review. What I can say is that whilst the writing employs the metre, rhyme and form of Poetry with a big P, there is a section of fourteen sonnets for instance, it manages to 'make it new' in a way that unstructured writing often fails to do. If Peter Bennet is a Pre-Modernist, there is something intensely modern in what he has to say. He writes with such elegance, style and economy that you tend to get stuck on a poem, reading it over and over, like a needle skipping on vinyl.

The streets have jetsam underfoot, and haar
thins briefly to reveal a hanging clue
of light that means a door ajar.

A whatnot made of rickety bamboo
leans in the damp scent of the hall. Please rest
your head against it till it tilts askew

then stumble out, in skirts of mist.

A square of dirt where bins are kept
becomes the Garden of the Blessed,

and opalescent gleams have crept
among the postcards in the window,
illuminating schoolgirl script

from Home is the Sailor.

The collection contains an ambitious sequence, 'Folly Wood', which is based on the Twelve Gates, or stages, of the alchemical process as set out by the English alchemist,

George Ripley, who died in 1490. It is a Poetry Book Society Choice for 2008 and you have to say it can't have been a tricky one. All I can say is, to borrow a phrase from Ebay, 'buy it now.' Here's a good chunk of the Sonnet 'The Lens'

But now it's you that's focused, as you lean
towards the window to inspect
a small boy, busy in the lane,
who is the child we never had
although we prayed each time we fucked.
He had a roving glance, a stone to fling,
and juggles with a nifty flick
beneath his leg, as if to prove
insouciance, then aims with love
straight for the glass but hits the brick.

Ian Collinson.