

Sentinel Poetry Book Competition 2021

Results:

1st prize: *Rebirthing* by John Salway

2nd prize: *Are You Man Enough To Be Woman?* By John Wilks

3rd prize: *Backendish* by Mike Farren

Judges Report by Mandy Pannett:

Rebirthing

Rebirthing stood out for me as a possible winner from the day I began reading the whole set of submitted collections.

Here is a poet in love with words and with the skills and imagination to shape them. Words tumble over each other as if with excitement at finding a voice. With their energy and bounce they resemble a jack in the box springing up; they are like all the Jacks listed in *Green World*: 'Jack springing on his heels out of the thickest box-tree/Laughing Jack, one-eyed, the knavish tart stealer/acrobatic Jack abseiling his beanstalk/the Sprat salting his leanness with poor john.'

Alliteration and assonance are only a couple of the many techniques this poet rejoices in using. Who could resist a line like this? 'He'll not be beached by his blubber/slithering his snaky melody to duck and dive/at the drumbeat. Such a slur and slide/of a bignose will skirl this skybound street/to reel all ten toes clean off the end of our feet!'

Similes, metaphors, juxtapositions – there is vibrancy in every syllable. *Brueghel's Piper* has 'cheeks like festival purses' and when he plays his bagpipes the air 'would spread the wings of a falcon.' In *Poor Poet* the narrator chews 'burnt stars' and sings to lice 'in a voice of raw blood'. Pebbles in his hand may 'bicker' but he can still 'squeeze out philosophy' from them.

The author of *Rebirthing* dives deep into the arts for allusions and imagery and for the shadows and shapes of a past that often feels pagan. There is nostalgia for those lost days, an almost regret that now 'We don't slaughter goats/ for their juggable skins/stroke those bullish ears/itching with that gadfly/nor couple on feast days/with wart-hogs or wolves.'

There is much tenderness in *Rebirthing*, particularly in the poignant epithalamium sung 'in the rhythms of the Levant' for Shylock's dead wife Leah – a woman for whom 'the miasma of plague/swallowed all her music.'

This is an outstanding collection and a well deserved first prize winner. I can hardly find words to praise it enough.

Are You Man Enough To Be Woman?

An intriguing title matched by the quirkiness of this collection. Poems are vibrant, hard-hitting and shocking in impact. Dystopian in theme and mood, they nevertheless leap off the page with their energy and originality. The poem *After Shane* refers to words being 'blood-drenched' and that is the effect they have on me. I feel part of a scenario where a woman 'imagines a gun so clearly/that her pointed fingers smoke/and drag her arm down with their weight.' The reader of *Are You Man Enough To Be Woman?* is no mere observer but is made to feel *inside* a world where 'clothes hangers gleam like meat hooks'.

Love in its many guises is a constant theme in this collection but it is a 'fever run cold' (*Maria from Kensington*) and underscored by a 'sense of disappointment'. Sometimes it is seen as 'a rescue dog that you expect/to crap where it crouches until you train/it otherwise and your home forever/stinks of piss and damp fur and you stumble/over half chewed bones.' (... *Ain't there One Damn Song ...?*). Here is one representation of love but this is an author who can see many aspects of a situation and has the skill to convey them. The poem *G.L.O.R.I.A* is striking for its tenderness and poignancy as it depicts a woman lover 'dead before forty' who 'laughed/ when I wept and shed tears as last summer/was less than glorious/who said my name/and nothing more when I was still sitting/ in traffic half way to the hospital.'

The way the writer uses the art of juxtaposition in *Are You Man Enough To Be Woman?* is brilliant. No other word will express the skill shown here. The *Blonde At The Bus Stop* is a perfect example. The blonde in question 'smells of last night's frag end kebab/and nail polish remover'. Nevertheless she has 'Nordic ancestors who scanned the horizon/and saw the raw edge of the world.' The final stanza combines the two worlds: 'A Viking helmet rusts/in the drowned ruins of East Anglia/and it starts to rain as the 252 arrives.'

The Grail Is Both A Cauldron And A Spear is another stunning poem. 'Can't beat/proper china for a decent brew' says the mother as she makes the tea. 'Don't be daft, girl,' she comments as her daughter refuses a Peek Freans biscuit, 'You don't eat enough to feed a sparrow.' Cliches like this are interspersed with the inner thoughts of the narrator, the 'Dream of strange paths/that trip my questing feet.' The poem's central symbolism is highlighted by this juxtaposition of voice and the reader is left with the paradox of biscuits and the body of Christ, of a cup of tea and a holy cup of blood.

Are You Man Enough To Be Woman? is not a comfortable read. Far from it. Shockingly powerful, every word matters. It is outstanding.

Backendish

I keep thinking about the word 'Backendish', apparently a Yorkshire dialect term for 'autumnal' and which is the title of one of the poems as well as of the whole collection. The title poem is based on Sinatra's *September Song* where seasons and days

dwindle down to a 'precious few' but I feel the word itself not only has implications of going back, of returning to origins, but also a suggestion of the 'ishness' of things – an uncertainty, a vagueness, a hint of the 'sort of' and 'maybe'. Someone from Yorkshire may well point out the error of my thinking but the poet does describe growing up with the word as 'impatience to go/round the loop again' – a reluctance to reach an ending.

All this is a way of saying how much I admire *Backendish* with its multi-layered encompassing of origins and recurrences. The first poem in the collection is aptly named *Origin Stories* and begins with the question 'Were you always what you are?/ Always becoming the thing/you inevitably had to be?' This theme is central to the poems – the idea of becoming 'more what we were always /going to be.' Throughout, there is an emphasis on layers: 'layer/upon layer/upon layer' – layers of silence, of art, of shape, of climate and the environment and of 'other dimensions that exist/between and beyond and/where *between* and *beyond* and *where*/ have no meaning.'(At *Farfield*).

Poetic crafting in *Backendish* is masterly and varied. I enjoyed the sequence based on Grayson Perry's *The Vanity of Small Differences* and appreciated the way these poems are interspersed with others throughout the collection so that each time the reader comes upon a new one it's a surprise and pleasure. Many of the poems are lyrical and visionary but others are dystopian and hard-hitting such as *To the Woman not watching the Glasgow School of Art fire* where a woman in a photograph is 'looking the wrong way' and the poet can't decide if it's indifference or if she is 'turning in despair from history'.

Uncertainty again, which brings me back to the title poem where the lines 'The light is beautiful today – relaxed/and gentle, as if September had cast off/summer's performance anxiety' contrast with the melancholic thought that winter 'was almost upon/John Keats when he wrote with calm and grace/of warm days that seemed they'd never cease/even though by the poem's end the birds/were gathering to fly, just like his life.'

I loved every word of *Backendish* and am very much looking forward to seeing it in print.

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