

Bold, Valentina (1994) *The Queen of Sheba by Kathleen Jamie; Kicking Back by Maggie Gibson.* Lines Review, 131 . pp. 62-64. ISSN 1952-1998

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attention. There's little in the way of abstraction or underlined "message"; but the line is free of stray noise or clutter, and restraint here is all the more telling. In addition, short shrift for slack practice. Each board is sound; each surface checked and refurbished if need be. The acknowledgement due to friends, the implications of present and recurring risk, the various lures and dangers of the sea are logged and elaborated. The real and local is real and strange enough, it doesn't require inflation or over-insistence. Near at hand the poet is "glad" of all the "impurities of shade" between copper and verdigris; further afield he discovers

Smooth and lower random rocks can't stay still, reveal themselves as

sea-lions stretching the limits of salt and silver.

Likewise in this attractive book precision, colour, possibility are linked to show what we may all come to recognise.

ALEXANDER HUTCHISON

THE QUEEN OF SHEBA By Kathleen Jamie. Bloodaxe Books, £6.95. KICKING BACK By Magi Gibson. Taranis Books, £5.99.

These books travel through psychological and political realms, inviting cultural reassessments. While the aims are ambitious, neither quite fulfils its promise.

Previous volumes by Jamie have explored Pakistan, Baltistan and Tibet; The Queen of Sheba examines exotic elements within Scotland. The title piece is amusing, but derivative, recalling Lochhead's "Song of Solomon." Jamie's Queen is a wanton Messiah who "eats / avocados with apostle spoons" and advocates autonomy for "the lasses." "Mother-May-I" addresses a similar topic, as girls take control of forbidden places. With a nod to "Tam Lin," they seek to experience "the jagged may's / white blossom." However, the distinctive, assured voice of Jamie's earlier work is absent.

In this collection Jamie attempts poetic street credibility for "the folks at home." "The Republic of Fife," in the vein of Robert Crawford, is a politicised realm with "PAY NO POLL TAX on a flyover" and "tinkies' benders." It ends, limply, with a call to "wave to the waving citizens" abroad. "Arraheids" is in forced, clumsy Scots; a linguistic choice which fails to enhance the rhythms or add resonance:

The museums of Scotland are wrang. They urnae arraheids but a show o grannies' tongues.

Jamie's Scots-English lacks conviction. The castaway of "Another day in paradise," with strains of Walcott's *Omeros*, inhabits an island close to home, "whaups flew between palm trees." Exciting connotations are dissipated by merely listing forgotten words in the sand: "forfauchlet; havers; fowk."

Posturing as a poet of "the new generation" makes Jamie ill at ease. She is ambivalent towards the fragmentary persona "Wee Wifey," again alluding to "Tam Lin." The narrator confesses:

I have a demon and her name is

WEE WIFEY

I caught her in a demon trap—the household of my skull I pinched her by her heel through her wily transformations until

she confessed

 $\label{eq:her_name} \text{her name indeed to be WEEWIFEY}$ and she was out to do me ill.

"Wee Wifey" is almost a woman's version of Hogg's Gilmartin; she prevents life being "long and lonely as a tossing cork." Yet these provocative implications are not developed.

Shortcomings are disappointing from a poet who proclaims, in "The Ice Queen of Ararat": "I say: go on. Test every move with a hard staff." They are particularly frustrating, given Jamie's power to create evocative images. There is a quiet dignity to the clock in "Nightwatch" which "calmly shows the state of night / with dark hands gloved in borrowed light." Jamie mixes the mundane and mystical adeptly to construct unlikely icons from "A Shoe" or "Child with pillar box and bin bags." In "Skeins o geese" visual images and sound are cleverly conflated: "The sky moves lik cattle, lowin."

Magi Gibson is technically crude in comparison. Kicking Back is a series of grim themes, pursued relentlessly. "Under the silken sky of India" discusses infanticide, tersely. A first-time father murders his child in an almost loving way:

he kisses his new-born daughter's lips with opium, he stops her tiny nose with dampened sand

Other poems deal with equally controversial subjects. "The Stolen Smile" treats female circumcision economically. A ten-year-old "with / eyes big and dark as Africa" is confused: "she only wants her smile," stolen in the cause of beauty by "older, wiser women." The understatement is evocative but the absence of moral commentary rather disquieting.

No solution is offered to Gibson's situations; she documents, without analysis. Often, she lacks subtlety. "Ordinary Joe" goes to war without qualms: "pissing bullets where he will / shitting death with mortar shells." "Not Poverty" draws parallels between the underdeveloped world and that of "DHSS rooms" where children want "something more / than begging bowls." "The Senile Dimension" is a brief word-play about dementia: "So sorry, dear / to hear."

Sometimes, this deadpan style is appropriate; there is a clinical quality, for instance, to "Anno Wreck Sick," with her "dying bone" and "shrinking skull." "Deadheading the Rose," probably the finest item, is a sequence following treatment for breast cancer; this has some of the survivalist qualities of Angela McSeveney's tragi-comic "The Lump." Gibson's heroine eventually feels herself "surfacing like a swimmer / who has almost drowned." The inverted allusion to "Not Waving but Drowning" is refreshingly positive in this context. There are occasional, tantalising, glimpses of an animated Gibson. "Yellowhammer" is, joyously, "born sunny-side up, jaunty as a jockey." "Heron," drawing connections between prehistory and the present, "slopes across the strath / on pterodactyl wings."

Gibson and Jamie seem to invite the label of "young women poets"; it is a dangerous action which restricts their potential for individualistic expression.

VALENTINA BOLD

... it is not rhyming and versing that maketh a poet — no more than a long gown maketh an advocate, who though he pleaded in armour should be an advocate and no soldier. But it is that feigning notable images of virtues, vices, or what else, with that delightful teaching, which must be the right describing note to know a poet by, although indeed the senate of poets hath chosen verse as their fittest raiment, meaning, as in matter they passed all in all, so in manner to go beyond them; not speaking (table talk fashion or like men in a dream) words as they chanceably fall from the mouth, but peizing each syllable of each word by just proportion according to the dignity of the subject.

-SIR PHILIP SYDNEY: An Apology for Poetry