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Jackie Kay: Scots Makar

Alan Riach (Wednesday 16 March 2016)

Following Edwin Morgan and Liz Lochhead, it's difficult to imagine a better choice for the new Scots Makar than Jackie Kay. It's true that a Gaelic poet would have been welcome to represent that component of our literature, and that the geographical areas of Scotland in the east, the north and the island archipelagos have given us a host of other contemporary poets who might have been appointed, but the term of the post is only five years – long enough for any poet! There is time for all the forms of representation Scotland needs to take their place in due course. In her commitment to poetry above all, Jackie Kay is, for many, a much wished-for and happy choice.

It's good, too, that the appointment has been made by politicians. They're taking a necessary risk. Poetry is not electable. The poet appointed can be pretty much guaranteed to do nothing sycophantic. In any nation, for such an appointment to be made by representatives of the state, whatever party they are of, is a public pronouncement of belief: poets are valuable creatures, and their words should be heard.

Jackie Kay's first book, *The Adoption Papers* (1991), was an autobiographical sequence depicting the child of a Scotswoman and a Nigerian man being adopted and welcomed into the home of a kindly, loving, staunchly communist couple living near Glasgow. Different voices and a range of characters – the daughter, the adoptive mother and the birth mother – speak of their experience. Tough as it is at times, the humanity of the story never palls or falters.

Jackie grew up in Glasgow, discovering her own sexual disposition as a young woman, and travelling later to Africa to meet her birth father. In her writing, she speculates on such apparently problematic aspects of identity, belonging and political desire. The themes of family, local, national and ancestral identity and questions of sexuality and social prejudice run through all her work.

All this might seem serious and maybe even sensational, outwardly-focused and explicit, and in her poems, plays, in her writing for children, in her short stories and the novel, *Trumpet*, she can be exactly that. "The Maw Broon Monologues" were a comedy blast, loaded with satiric intent. Yet the subtlety of her versification, the nuanced deployment of individual voices and tones, the tensions and sympathies between characters realised through speech

recorded in verse, are all carried along on a sustaining sense of good humour, humanistic sympathy and sheer eloquence.

Her further books – *Other Lovers* (1993), *Off Colour* (1998), *Life Mask* (2005), *Darling* (2007), *Fiere* (2011) and *Reality, Reality* (2012) – take her in all sorts of directions: public and personal, exploring politics and language, geography and history, motherhood, falling in love, racism, prejudice, pride, popular culture and Shakespeare, Scotland and Africa.

The epigraph to *Darling* is from Bertolt Brecht: “In the dark times / Will there also be singing? / Yes, there will also be singing. / About the dark times.” As the state of Britain goes the way it’s going, and the people of Scotland might increasingly need a poet to sing about the dark times, Jackie Kay has taken on a job that will require all her resources of humour and engagement. As Edward Dorn put it, the modern world is designed for entrapment, but laughter can blow it to shreds. Kay ends her poem “Old Tongue” with a declaration of desire and intent: “I wanted my old accent back, / my old tongue. My dour soor Scottish tongue. / Sing-songy. I wanted to *gie it laldie*.”

She has her old tongue and the moment starts now for the new Makar’s voice to ring out. *Gie it laldie, Jackie*.