

Review

Warning: May Contain Politics.

Poems on Diversity, Social Justice and Community Involvement by Jo McFarlane

This book is not for the faint-hearted, as evinced by the cover which features a saltire with the iconic image of Che Guevara printed across it. At the beginning, the poems are more polemical than poetic and not for the poetry purist. However, the politics and sentiments are where the book's power lies, and we are introduced straight away with two personal/political pieces, both based in Edinburgh. The first one uses the letters of her name to spell out a wish list for the opening of the Scottish parliament. The second is an angry lament set in a protest at the mound with a regretful twist at the end expressing her chagrin at not having been there.

Throughout this collection of over 50 poems, the overarching theme is that the personal is always political. Poem after poem reflects Jo's interest in community and identity politics. It is at one and the same time postmodern in its playfulness and forceful in its tackling of issues head on. Jo goes toe-to-toe with domestic violence, mental ill health, and social injustice - always with the poet's honesty and courage to tell it how it is, no matter how dark at times. Yet when reading her work you are given the impression that here is a playful author with her heart on her sleeve and occasionally her tongue in her cheek.

I grinned with joy when I read *Glad to be Mad* as it reminded me of an old friend from the comedy scene who worked at CAPS (the advocacy project who wore t-shirts with the Glad to be Mad slogan). The title at once challenges the stigma of mental illness and reclaims the derogatory term 'mad' as a badge of honour. Jo takes it a stage further in the last verse

We are alive

And we are here to shine the torch of hope

That something grander than supremacy exists:

*The saving grace of voices joined in protest
And the healing power of love*

Here she is asserting her identity, speaking with authority and turning perceived suffering into celebration. This is essentially the best aspect of the book.

Another highlight for me was *Out and Proud* in which Jo again stands proud in her identity, the reference at the end of the poem about being *rainbow-sexual and proud*, the rainbow being the international LGBT flag.

This collection is also angry. *Greatest Hits*, about domestic violence is sickening in its direct descriptions of brutality. It is designed to anger and upset the reader and is fierce in its simple two line rhymes. There is also a sharp witted poem against the tourist industry called *Exchange Rate*, which juxtaposes the reality of life for the people and the

*'...sugar coated fizz and beefed up lies
They offer the man on the moon
and steal the magic from the skies.'*

As the book goes on the poetry seems to get better, though I don't know if this is by design. In some of the later poems she uses more abstract images to create the feeling and essence of her work. An example of this can be found in *Song of War*, which features the line

*'... the lonely harmonica of a boy,
too homesick to remember the tune'*

The best poem in the collection for me is *Dystopia*, which is a 2-page epic (most of Jo's poems are very short) which compares the relationship between an inmate and the prison they are incarcerated in to that of a father and son. The prison and its rules, and the grind of day-to-day life teach the inmate to conform and be grateful for scant

reward. But the poem is also a critique of the promise of freedom that religion gives to the afterlife – and in all this a young inmate pits his spirit against his environment.

The book is not without its faults: there are arguably too many poems here, and some are most certainly performance poems which don't work as well on the page. Jo has covered this base, however, by providing a disc containing 34 tracks. The disc is flawlessly orated and Jo's playful voice and gentle Edinburgh accent compliment the work well.

The arts have always been a space for political expression and poetry is indeed a good tool to use for popular education and in this case both the book and the disc can be used for the purpose of educating people, creating critical debate and discussion and opening the space for resistance and change. There are many examples in the book where the subject matter can be explored and pulled apart, but it is the politics of the book which will inspire others to write or tell of their own experience.

In conclusion, if you are a scholar of classic verse and poetry, this may not be the book for you: the poems are very direct, punchy and powerful in their sincerity. But if you are interested in polemical, campaigning, awareness raising and playful work it is definitely for you. It is in the humanity of her work that her strength lies. It is also worth noting that Jo McFarlane has only been writing since 2005, which makes her very young in poetry years. Jo is without doubt an emerging talent who we will be hearing more of in the future.

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The book is on sale from Jo herself at £5.00 + £1.00 postage and packing and she can be contacted on www.edinburghjo.co.uk