

*It's Poetry, Jim,
But Not as We Know It*

Kathleen Jamie, *Jizzen*, Picador, £6.99

Carol Ann Duffy, *The World's Wife*, Picador, £10.00

It is tempting to wonder if Kathleen Jamie left Bloodaxe because she was fed up with all her books being lumbered with Peter Porter's assertion that "one's duty is just to read her poems". If so, she's been no better served by Picador because her new collection *Jizzen* comes larded with equally contentious praise and labels. The blurb quotes Robert Crawford asserting that "With *The Queen of Sheba* Kathleen Jamie has produced the best individual collection of poems by a woman living in twentieth-century Scotland" which is rather a back-handed compliment. Brilliant—for a girl. The blurb also tells us that "Through the perspectives of emigrant and native, critic and intimate, Jamie addresses Scotland in all its living complexity". A common question that used to be asked about texts in literature classes was "who is speaking"; *Jizzen's* blurb makes me want to ask "who is listening?" Presumably the book either isn't for English readers then or, if it is, the experience is supposed to be like that of watching celebrity chefs on TV introducing us to traditional Scottish recipes. Perhaps it's just a symptom of the times that it's virtually impossible to detect the levels of irony involved in the making and marketing of cultural products and exactly what is intended by publishing a book with a blurb like that with an imprint whose address is London SW1.

However, these doubts are not allayed by the poetry itself. Jamie writes in both English and Scots although I'm not qualified to judge whether it's real Scots or Synthetic Scots after MacDiarmid. This is an important question and I'm playing devil's advocate because I want to be able to understand as fully as possible the poetry in this foreign language that's being marketed to me as—the blurb again—"worldly and other-worldly, remarkable in its humanity, political sophistication and lyric authority". And I don't. For example, "Lucky Bag" begins,

Tattie scones, St Andra banes,
a rod-and-crescent Pictish stane,
a field of whaups, organic neeps,
a poke o Brattisani's chips...

An earlier poem in the volume "Song of Sunday" begins in similar mode:

A driech day, and nothing to do
bar watch starlings fluchter
over soup bones
left on a plate on the grass.

I assume that in "Lucky Bag" "banes" is to be translated by poor benighted sassenachs like me as "bones". What I don't understand is why Jamie has used "bones" and not "banes" in "Song of Sunday". An argument could be made for assonantal chiming of the "o" in "soup" and "bones" but an equally powerful argument could be made, if she'd written "banes" for the "a" in "banes", "a", "plate" and "grass". In fact, "soup banes" might have made a more interesting sound, might have enacted the clash of English and Scots that "Song of Sunday" makes. But then, of course, that's another problem: I can't hear this poem properly because presumably the clash is not between Scots and English but actually between Scots and Scottish English because I don't imagine that when Jamie speaks English she speaks in R.P. And even if I could hear Scottish English in my head would it be urban or rural, Highlands or Islands or whatever? This perhaps makes me a poor reader but it also makes for a slightly unsatisfactory aesthetic experience. I can only hear one of the voices; or perhaps I can hear a voice which we might call "media Scots" and I don't know if that's right.

The preceding paragraph may seem like pedantry but *fizzen* and similar work by poets like, for example, W.N. Herbert and Don Paterson causes one to reassess the comfortable contract that English poetry habitually assumes exists between reader and writer. The important general observation Eric Griffiths made some years ago in *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry* is perhaps relevant here:

Whatever else poetry may be, it is certainly a use of language that works with the sounds of words, and so the absence of clearly indicated sound from the silence of the written word creates a double nature in printed poetry, making it both itself and something other—a text of hints at voicing, whose centre in utterance lies outside itself, and also an achieved pattern on the page, salvaged from the

evanescence of the voice in air. Browning names this double nature in a phrase from *The Ring and The Book*—"the printed voice".

To borrow Griffiths's terms, then, at least half the time *Jizzen* challenges English conceptions of a "centre of utterance". I'm intrigued by the challenge if not always feeling that I can ever hope to understand it fully. Or perhaps thinking that it all reduces to strategies is part of my poor benighted English inheritance. I have to say that I don't think *Jizzen* is as consistently good as *The Queen of Sheba*. There are some fine poems here—such as "The Tay Moses"—but also a lot that seem, no matter how many times I read them aloud to myself, to be metrically flat and, in the manner of much contemporary free verse, to offer the reader subject over language and execution. *Jizzen* seems to have lost the energy of Jamie's earlier work. Strangely enough it's the Scots poems—"strangely" because I don't always "get" them—where subject and language seem to activate each other most powerfully.

Carol Ann Duffy's new collection, *The World's Wife*, also comes to us in a way that privileges what it is over how it does it. I draw attention to this at the outset because Duffy's earlier poetry impressed me with its interest in its material and in how people and, indeed, nations are constructed by language. Her poetry seemed to exemplify the way that, in David Morley's memorable phrase, in the best British poetry of the 1980s and 1990s "the poet's language never takes its 'eye' off the reader". *The World's Wife* gives us thirty poems which set out to subvert myth and history by retelling them through the personae of the wives of famous men. Duffy is never less than amusing and engaging—I particularly liked the passage in "Mrs Tiresias" when Tiresias having "[come] home female" gets his first period. Duffy has always been one of our funniest poets and much of the comedy here comes from this refusal to ignore the practical side of myths. *The World's Wife*, then, is a highly entertaining read. The book is a sequence of monologues as opposed to a collection of poems since the material is organised and shaped for maximum dramatic effect. I can imagine some of the pieces here being absolutely chilling in performance. But I also found this disappointing because in a collection like *The Other Country* Duffy kept monologues and poetry in balance so that there was a mix of voices. And it was this mix, the playing off of one poem against another, that allowed Duffy to gesture at larger concerns and enacted the senses of cultural and national linguistic constructedness I mentioned earlier.

I missed this in *The World's Wife*. I wondered whether all Duffy's women would actually speak with the same voice, a kind of self-ob-

serving angry comedy: “watch me now I’m going to be really subversive”. The whole idea of *The World’s Wife* also seems rather dated—I kept thinking back to Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber* and collective art projects from the same period like “Pandora’s Box”. This perhaps highlights the way that mainstream poetry often seems to lag behind significant paradigm shifts in culture and society. The suspicion that the book might not be all that subversive is confirmed by its reliance on mythical and historical subjects. This implies that feminism and gender relations are matters of mythopoesis and not things that are inextricable from everyday day life and, indeed, poetry now. Yes, Duffy does have “Frau Freud” and “Elvis’s Twin Sister” but these are actually among the weakest pieces here as if her nerve failed her the closer she got to the contemporary.

Elaine Showalter has written that “we all live out the social stories of our time” and just how much *The World’s Wife* does this is confirmed by “The Kray Sisters”. The sisters start off with a club called “Ballbreakers” and then move to “a classier gaff” called “Prickteasers”:

We admit, bang to rights, that the fruits
of feminism—fact—made us rich, feared, famous,
friends of the stars. Have a good butcher’s at these—
there we for ever are in glamorous black-and-white,
assertively staring out next to Germaine, Bardot,
Twiggy and Lulu, Dusty and Yoko, Bassey and Babs,
Sandy, Diana Dors.

And this returns us to my opening point about levels of irony. It is impossible to know what is being mocked here. Is the poem saying that feminism is quaint and historical, merely a part of pop culture? Is it saying that political struggle and the history of ideas are indistinguishable from the history of celebrity? Is it saying that the career of Diana Dors “voices” as much about the condition of women as the books of Germaine Greer? Or perhaps the point is more subtle: dominant ideology and oppositional forces are now indistinguishable and it doesn’t matter. In which case, it becomes clear how the monologues of *The World’s Wife* are the fruits of an engaged poem like “Standing Female Nude”. But, if a particular historical period has come to a “full stop”, I’d still like to know whether Duffy thinks this is a “good thing” or a “bad thing”.