

Ordinary Domestic – Collected Short Stories

by Carol McKay

The PotHole Press – Kindle Edition

REVIEW BY ALISON NAPIER

Rumours of the demise of the short story may have been greatly exaggerated but still they persist. Who needs them. Who reads them. Like a sherbet lemon when you are just getting interested and pouf! it all fizzles out in your mouth and disappears leaving you bereft and bitter sweet. A conversation with a stranger on the tube, moments before they lurch to their feet and scuttle onto the platform, stranding you in mid-sentence. Never enough time. Fleeting and shallow.

But a good short story is the breathless compressed intensity of an illicit love affair, a counterpoint to the predictable safety of a monotonous monogamous novel. It is the thrill of the rollercoaster at the shows, it is a thousand emotions in seven minutes for the price of a decent bottle of wine.

Ordinary Domestic is a collection of short stories and this book made me deeply happy. Not because the stories were joyful and uplifting (though a few of them were) but because they made me think and feel, wince and shudder, even on one occasion, cry. Carol McKay's skill is in the compassion she conveys for her characters regardless of their flaws or the chaos of their lives. At the end of a story I frequently flicked back, anxious, intrigued, wanting to hover by a shoulder and to accompany these disparate people again on their 3000 word journeys.

If there is an over-arching theme it is disconnection, from a partner, from the past, from society. Several characters return from a journey to find the emotional landscape they left irretrievably altered. Others have retreated into tormented inner journeys without ever leaving the sofa.

She ranges comfortably between wildly differing voices (old, young, straight, gay, female, male) and locations (Africa, the Hebrides, Spain, Glasgow), capturing characterisation in a phrase, such as William in 'Unrestricted'. 'He was driving like a wean playin the Playstation. He was tryin tae droon it aw oot.' She captures the stifling impoverished claustrophobia of a bedsit as skilfully as she does the shimmering heat of a Spanish summer.

Her stories are unpredictable. They are naked and brave, rich and troubling. She writes about the awkward topics (disability, adoption, incest, sexual violence) with such deceptive ease that it is our own discomfort and prejudices that we bump up against, not those of the author's. Never assume you know what will 'happen'. Often little does. But that little will be a beautifully judged, finely tuned, deeply perceptive piece of perfection and you will be glad that you lived those minutes of your life reading these words.

Stand-out pieces include '*Ugly Duckling*' (disturbing sex in the Planetarium), '*Total Obliteration*' (disturbing sex on the Rugby club night out), and the beautifully dense '*Decomposing*' (with the splendid opening line, 'The kids' pet fish hang like Christmas tree decorations from the vegetation in the aquarium'.)

It is no surprise that this collection contains several stories that have won prestigious prizes. We are privileged to have them all gathered together in the extraordinary *Ordinary Domestic*.

Alison Napier lives in NW Sutherland. Her fiction has appeared in various journals and anthologies and she has just completed her first novel, *Take-Away People*.