

AND THEN FOREVER

Christine De Luca

Published by The Shetland Times Ltd

REVIEW BY KENNETH STEVEN

At first I didn't know quite what to make of this novel. I wasn't sure I cared sufficiently about the characters whose lives were being re-created at the turn of last century, far less that of the granddaughter in today's Edinburgh. Both narratives seemed cluttered with rather inconsequential detail, and lacking big events. For a time I kept waiting for something to happen, sure I must be being led towards some great emotional chasm that would sweep away my indifference.

But it didn't, and I wasn't. Instead I found that the seemingly inconsequential kindling of daily life for the emigrants in Canada and for the granddaughter and her circle a hundred years on began to become real. I found myself 'there' in the same way that the sound of a radio becomes clearer and clearer the closer one comes to it.

I still yearned for some bigger happenings all the same. The Winnipeg lives, very well interwoven, are a bit too gentle and easy. They have to contrast more sharply with the smoothness of our ultra-comfortable modernity: I need to feel the cold more intensely, I need to fear a rat under a bed and hear its scuttling, I need to worry that someone who has been skating and who has fallen through the ice may not survive the pneumonia they have now contracted. I know full well that these Shetland emigrants (like my own Highland forebears who settled in Canada) were tough and had to be tough. But I bet they knew what homesickness was just the same, even if they didn't allow themselves to talk about it.

Speech is a thorny problem for any writer re-creating an older world, whether a hundred or a thousand years ago. The trouble is that an archaic construction can render the whole thing clumsy, but speech that flows too easily and colloquially can make the story seem too contemporary. For me it was the latter, but I know from experience how hard it is to win here.

For all that this has much going for it as a first novel. The Shetland connection (which I would expect and hope to find in anything by Christine De Luca) is well woven through the story. There's much here about home and belonging, about what both those things mean to different people. There's much here about love, about what

that really means. How far will love go and how much will love take? Yet the big questions are never asked with capital letters; they are there as an undersong throughout the respective narratives.

The Shetland Times have published (very fine) editions of Christine De Luca's volumes of poetry in the past. Perhaps that's why she has gone back to them now, but I'm not all that convinced a bigger house wouldn't have taken this novel onboard. My guess is that this would have allowed a far larger potential readership to encounter the novel. Perhaps she'll consider that next time round, because I hope there'll be a next time. Every piece of writing is a learning exercise (unless you're too arrogant to believe it) and this novel has proved she can write fiction.

Kenneth Steven lives in Highland Perthshire; he's a poet, translator and children's author. His collection of short fiction, *The Ice and other stories*, appeared from Argyll in 2010.