

Introduction at launch of Poetic Licence in a time of Corona by Chris Fitzpatrick

As dawn was breaking on Monday morning, I got up to read *Poetic Licence in a Time of Corona* knowing Chris was going to be interviewed on the Ryan Tubridy Show later on. For a few more hours it was ours. No, his. But he'd written it for two of us, for me and Sylvia Plath (p. 25)

The poem is a wound I cut
on myself, deeply I must go
do not ask me the reasons why
I will be the last to know
you are my assistant
please keep your hands steady
if I need gas or ligature
you must be ready
in the distance, I see it!
look! my beating heart!
if I die on this table
you have played your part

For those of you who don't normally read, or even like poetry, come to this collection with an open heart. A book of poetry is a bit like an album – the songs (or poems) need to hang together; each track has a reason for being there; and when it works you will listen (or read) again and again.

Without titles this memoir leads you gently in. No formal announcements in shouty capitals telling you WHAT THE POEM IS ABOUT. But the sequence matters. It gives us stepping stones over complex waters, a stream of consciousness woven deftly in and out and around the reality of a pandemic raging in the background. Declan, his brother who is dying, tells him to go upstairs to find a book to read while he is sleeping. He finds "The Tempest" and brings it back down to sit with his brother (p. 40):

No Tempest now, only my brother sleeping &
the soft *shush* of his pneumatic mattress –
caressing the silence between us.

Switch tone in an earlier poem and find the man who is missing the chats he used to have with the Brazilian woman at the check-out (p.22)

I told her I blamed Neymar
for our sons' dodgy haircuts
she thinks Irish politicians are the best
& prefers Paddy's to Carnival
I say I'm not sure about either

In the writing, poems swirl, hiccup, rove, lose beginnings, endings, words morph to new words, and sometimes the whole thing is shelved. But eventually, if a poem wants to land, it lands. A poem is

finished, they say, when it could only be your poem and these poems with their ampersands could only be Chris's. On page 23 he remembers a spy he'd been fascinated by during the cold war

Mr Cox in the newspaper shop says
George Blake is a communist who
doesn't believe in God, but the word
sounds like communion to me

And there he is gluing an Irish Press photograph of the spy into his scrap book, "between George Best & / Bruce Reynolds, the Great Train Robber." We're back in the seventies, and we too have to make space in the bedroom for a brother's Liverpool football club paraphernalia. By the end of this book you feel like you know Chris: the boy, the adolescent, the man. And you'll like him.

In the third last poem the therapeutic work of writing is done. Over a bridge the adult sees himself as a young boy:

Ahead of me, a small boy runs: striped T-shirt,
plastic sandals, towel under his arm, togs on
his head. He splashes in the tide. It is summer.

When I catch up with him, he doesn't see me.

A writer came to me with a garden of poems, a garden that was a bit overgrown – flowers, weeds, thistles, orchids, trees – all fighting for the light. He learned to weed and prune, to set new seeds, to root out what wasn't needed, and turned it into a spare zen garden, a place of stillness.

In the middle of the collection, addressing his friend in the form of 11 haiku he opens with

Rain on the wind comes
from wherever it blows: Ireland
Finland, anywhere

and closes with something profound, something for those of us in the same place, coming to the end of careers, starting new ventures, wondering at it all: the past, the present, the future:

in our sixties now
we tread on, thread & tread
pick up, before letting go

shin up that pole once
more; tell me what you see
ahead, more behind

Peppered with lightness, moments of deep grief, and quirky side-steps, *Poetic Licence In A Time Of Corona* shows us how one man (who happened to be a doctor) made sense of the strangest of times.

Alison Hackett, 12 May 2022