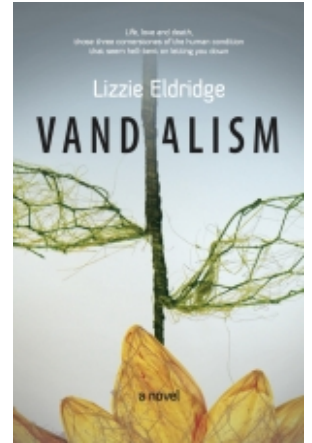


‘Vandalism’ by Lizzie Eldridge

Review by Martyn Colebrook

Lizzie Eldridge’s second novel is a biting and bleak study of love, betrayal and their consequences, set amongst a group of friends based in Glasgow. For Moira, twenty-eight, quick-witted and feisty, the security of her ever-dependable relationship with the dutiful Andy is a branch to cling to as she finds herself threatening to be swept away by an ever-increasing emotional tide of personal tribulations which underpin the plot. For Andy, his conscientious attention is admirable in the face of Moira’s adverse conditions but ultimately hides a secret betrayal which, when unmasked by Moira’s friend, Alex, reveals that she has unwittingly been both the player and the played. For Ewan, the third element in this piece of theatrical carnage, Moira is a reckless return to rake over the ashes of a long-ended love affair out of which the unthinkable emerges. Eldridge’s fourth participant is Connie, best friend to Moira and enduring the descent towards death from breast cancer.



Upon being informed of Connie’s diagnosis and the imminent surgery, Moira reflects:

Limitations place infinite significance on the everyday mundane. Perhaps all of life should be lived like that, I thought, remembering crying as a child because Christmas Day was over for another year. Never enjoying the present because of its ephemeral loneliness. And then love and death enter the equation, forcing things to be perceived in a wholly different light.

The ‘infinite significance’ of the ‘everyday mundane’ is a key aspect of Eldridge’s emergent style; her writing, in this novel at least, eases between the broad strokes on the Glaswegian canvas in order to develop the psychological studies of each character, but this is in marked contrast with a brutally stark eye for detail which informs the routines and humdrum daily structures within which her characters operate. Such structures seek to mask the ‘ephemeral loneliness’ which arguably determines the decisions that Moira makes in the novel. There are outbreaks of happiness and moments of exuberant pleasure but they remain

adumbrated by the relentless focus on Connie's condition and Moira's transgressions. Later Andy is seen as one who:

[...] carried on with the daily routines which sustain life amidst the numb and frozen stillness of anticipated death. I couldn't fault him. [...] When Connie's illness careered into yet another terrifying impasse, Andy's modest and steady commitment remained the only certainty.

The manner in which 'routine' is able to 'sustain life' reinforces the contrast between the highly structured and repetitive existence which is ostensibly lived by Andy and the chaotic and carefree refusal to grow up which informs the perpetually adolescent Moira, whose persistent seeking of thrills and fun comes at the risk of leaving her exposed and isolated. The 'frozen stillness' is a striking image, persisting as it does with the sensation of a stopped clock whose miniscule and imperceptible marching on in time only subtly ripples the surface. The 'impasse' which imposes itself upon Connie's illness is defined by the conflict between medicine and biological decay but the 'impasse' is recurrent — Moira's frequent agonising over her affair with Ewan becomes a battle between guilt and honesty, Moira's occasional emotional detachment from Andy plays out similarly.

As Moira muses on her first relationship with Ewan, the seven week fling prior to his departure overseas, she concludes:

The silly thing is that if Ewan offered me the same deal all over again, I'd accept. Nine years down the line and none the wiser even with the benefit of hindsight. Maybe we never grow older or maybe we were simply trying to preserve a snatch of immortality within the constant flux and last-minute decisions which end up having unforetold and catastrophic effects on the lives of millions of seemingly disparate people. Or maybe I am dramatising again.

The ever-so-slightly hysterical pronouncements from Moira emphasise her own free-spirited and devil-may-care approach to life. Her cod philosophical observations have the trappings of the naïve, as do her metaphysical speculations. She seems compelled to exist in an endless loop of bad decisions and failed romances after being charmed and seduced by the handsome and the edgy, over the dependable and reliable.

Moira's transgression, and her pregnancy during the fling with Ewan, are compounded by her inability to determine who the father is. Andy's transgression

— his fling with Christina — is revealed in proximity to the date that Connie dies. The use of the confessional form in the latter and Moira's articulation of her own internal despair at the manifestation of her duplicity are striking scenarios when juxtaposed against the foregrounding of Connie's death.

As Moira leaves Ewan's, having deceived Andy by not informing him over her whereabouts overnight, she pushes the keys through the letterbox and concludes: 'I knew our time had run out, despite the fact it never would.' Thus she clings to the knowledge she could return to Ewan and rekindle the same desires, given their mutual feelings. This is markedly different from the 'frozen stillness' of the time surrounding the last stages of Connie's cancer. As she returns home, it is apparent that Andy has also not returned that evening and is with Christina, his lover.

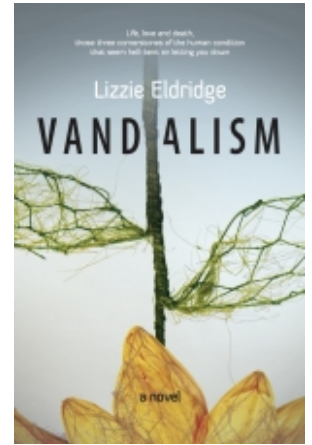
The 'vandalism' of the title is manifest in the actions within the novel: intimate relationships and romantic entanglements are violated and impaired; trust is breached repeatedly; routine and structure are fractured and fragmented; Connie's body is subjected to repeated vandalism by the cancerous tumor which is spreading rapidly.

Overall, Lizzie Eldridge's novel is a well-executed and challenging exploration of human desires and their expression against the turbulence of daily life and the poignant collisions between the past and the present. The character presentations are effective and portrayed with a conscious familiarity as to the plights and problems each encounter. The narrative is paced and Eldridge's capacity to maintain the reader's interest is a testament to the quality of the writing and the depth of this particular plot.

References & Further Information

Vandalism by Lizzie Eldridge is published by Merlin Publishers, 2015.

Lizzie Eldridge's second novel is a biting and bleak study of love, betrayal and their consequences, set amongst a group of friends based in Glasgow. For Moira, twenty-eight, quick-witted and feisty, the security of her ever-dependable relationship with the dutiful Andy is a branch to cling to as she finds herself threatening to be swept away by an ever-increasing emotional tide of personal tribulations which underpin the plot. For Andy, his conscientious attention is admirable in the face of Moira's adverse conditions but ultimately hides a secret betrayal which, when unmasked by Moira's friend, Alex, reveals that she has unwittingly been both the player and the played. For Ewan, the third element in this piece of theatrical carnage, Moira is a reckless return to rake over the ashes of a long-ended love affair out of which the unthinkable emerges. Eldridge's fourth participant is Connie, best friend to Moira and enduring the descent towards death from breast cancer.



Upon being informed of Connie's diagnosis and the imminent surgery, Moira reflects:

Limitations place infinite significance on the everyday mundane. Perhaps all of life should be lived like that, I thought, remembering crying as a child because Christmas Day was over for another year. Never enjoying the present because of its ephemeral loneliness. And then love and death enter the equation, forcing things to be perceived in a wholly different light.

The 'infinite significance' of the 'everyday mundane' is a key aspect of Eldridge's emergent style; her writing, in this novel at least, eases between the broad strokes on the Glaswegian canvas in order to develop the psychological studies of each character, but this is in marked contrast with a brutally stark eye for detail which informs the routines and humdrum daily structures within which her characters operate. Such structures seek to mask the 'ephemeral loneliness' which arguably determines the decisions that Moira makes in the novel. There are outbreaks of happiness and moments of exuberant pleasure but they remain adumbrated by the relentless focus on Connie's condition and Moira's transgressions. Later Andy is seen as one who:

[...] carried on with the daily routines which sustain life amidst the numb and frozen stillness of anticipated death. I couldn't fault him. [...] When Connie's illness careered into yet another terrifying impasse, Andy's modest and steady commitment remained the only certainty.

The manner in which 'routine' is able to 'sustain life' reinforces the contrast between the highly structured and repetitive existence which is ostensibly lived by Andy and the chaotic and carefree refusal to grow up which informs the perpetually adolescent Moira, whose persistent seeking of thrills and fun comes at the risk of leaving her exposed and isolated. The 'frozen stillness' is a striking image, persisting as it does with the sensation of a stopped clock whose miniscule and imperceptible marching on in time only subtly ripples the surface. The 'impasse' which imposes itself upon Connie's illness is defined by the conflict between medicine and biological decay but the 'impasse' is recurrent — Moira's frequent agonising over her affair with Ewan becomes a battle between guilt and honesty, Moira's occasional emotional detachment from Andy plays out similarly.

As Moira muses on her first relationship with Ewan, the seven week fling prior to his departure overseas, she concludes:

The silly thing is that if Ewan offered me the same deal all over again, I'd accept. Nine years down the line and none the wiser even with the benefit of hindsight. Maybe we never grow older or maybe we were simply trying to preserve a snatch of immortality within the constant flux and last-minute decisions which end up having unforecasted and catastrophic effects on the lives of millions of seemingly disparate people. Or maybe I am dramatising again.

The ever-so-slightly hysterical pronouncements from Moira emphasise her own free-spirited and devil-may-care approach to life. Her cod philosophical observations have the trappings of the naïve, as do her metaphysical speculations. She seems compelled to exist in an endless loop of bad decisions and failed romances after being charmed and seduced by the handsome and the edgy, over the dependable and reliable.

Moira's transgression, and her pregnancy during the fling with Ewan, are compounded by her inability to determine who the father is. Andy's transgression — his fling with Christina — is revealed in proximity to the date that Connie dies. The use of the confessional form in the latter and Moira's articulation of her own internal despair at the manifestation of her duplicity are striking scenarios when juxtaposed against the foregrounding of Connie's death.

As Moira leaves Ewan's, having deceived Andy by not informing him over her whereabouts overnight, she pushes the keys through the letterbox and concludes: 'I knew our time had run out, despite the fact it never would.' Thus she clings to

the knowledge she could return to Ewan and rekindle the same desires, given their mutual feelings. This is markedly different from the 'frozen stillness' of the time surrounding the last stages of Connie's cancer. As she returns home, it is apparent that Andy has also not returned that evening and is with Christina, his lover.

The 'vandalism' of the title is manifest in the actions within the novel: intimate relationships and romantic entanglements are violated and impaired; trust is breached repeatedly; routine and structure are fractured and fragmented; Connie's body is subjected to repeated vandalism by the cancerous tumor which is spreading rapidly.

Overall, Lizzie Eldridge's novel is a well-executed and challenging exploration of human desires and their expression against the turbulence of daily life and the poignant collisions between the past and the present. The character presentations are effective and portrayed with a conscious familiarity as to the plights and problems each encounter. The narrative is paced and Eldridge's capacity to maintain the reader's interest is a testament to the quality of the writing and the depth of this particular plot.

(c) The Bottle Imp