

'Serious Sweet' by A. L. Kennedy

Review by Kirsty Lear-Grant



Serious Sweet is the most recent novel by A.L. Kennedy, the award-winning novelist, short story writer, and comedian. Prior to reading the novel, I read some reviews and was fascinated by their diversity — comments ranging from disappointing to outright marvellous. This told me that I was about to embark on a work of art; after all, I would expect nothing less from a contender for this year's Man Booker prize.

The novel is set in the heart of contemporary London and follows its two protagonists, John Sigurdsson and Meg Williams through a single day. This type of circadian novel is not a new phenomenon: James Joyce gave us *Ulysses*, and Virginia Woolf *Mrs Dalloway*, but the circadian structure is by no means simple; there is back story, plot and resolution to consider whilst maintaining enough drive and pace to move the story forward. Kennedy has certainly achieved this in *Serious Sweet*.

We learn that John is a fickle character, who at fifty-nine years of age has recently divorced his adulterous wife, and whose professional life hangs in the balance. Working as a senior civil servant in Westminster — much to his daughter's disapproval — he has been attempting to uncover some immoral activity. We learn about John's life through a series of back-stories, which in some cases slows the pace of an otherwise punchy narrative. For example, the scene early in the novel where John is in a taxi heading to work: his mind wanders to a holiday in Berlin, which he spent with his daughter ... this recollection goes on for eleven pages. This may be forgiven, however, if we take the time to embrace the authenticity of place in this scene:

Light in blades on the water, bridges menacing only softly overhead and then a broad European sky. The Fernsehturm spiking up into crisp blue looks like Sputnik after an accident with a capitalist harpoon, a speared ball, a penetrated curve, although remarkably asexual, unsexual.

Kennedy's precise language and poetic rhythm is sustained throughout the novel, but I did find my mind wandering in these long, drawn-out passages. What we do learn in this scene, though, is that John is guilty. He finds himself in Berlin with his now-adult daughter and realises how absent he was from her life when she was growing up. The father-daughter relationship is tense, forcing John to confront his own self-loathing, a character trait that sets him up for the rest of the novel.

Aside from these lengthy episodes, the pace moves along sharply. We find out that John has a talent for letter-writing as well as money-making — perhaps an old-fashioned way of wooing, yet a romantic way to connect while remaining inconspicuous. I believe that John is reaching here, hiding his outer self while safely exposing his inner self. It is clear that he is searching for something pure. And that is how he meets Meg.

Meg Williams is a forty-five-year-old bankrupt accountant, now working in an animal shelter because:

people who've been damaged by people go and work with salvaged animals because the animals have also been damaged by people.

Meg is a victim of sexual abuse from a previous partner, something that we only learn in smatterings throughout the novel. By limiting this information, Kennedy rightfully protects her protagonist, thus enhancing our sympathy for her. Meg, however, cannot escape this physical damage that her body has endured. Furthermore, we also learn that the character has been treated for cancer. For me, Meg is the most authentic character in the novel. A struggling alcoholic, Meg is on the wagon then off the wagon and blames her 'more recent fall on Margaret Thatcher' — there is some dark humour here that I really enjoyed. The narrator tells us, 'The trouble was that Margaret Thatcher got her drunk', but Meg admits that this is 'Another lie. I got me drunk'. This back-and-forth between third-person and first-person narrators highlights the characters' inner conflict. And it is

within these italicised monologues that Kennedy unwraps her characters, peeling back the layers of what we think we see, and then showing the true self, raw as it might be. Yet for Meg, underneath all her self-loathing there is hope, and I believe that is what this novel is really trying to portray.

While the novel itself can be read as a political satire, and political corruption is plentiful in the narrative, it is simply a back-story. It serves as a character tool, and a sub-plot, allowing Kennedy to show the real story which is the unfolding of the human consciousness. Kennedy is cleverly hinting at this even before we open the book. Take the cover art: on the front we have Meg, standing on a hill, looking down on London, and on the back we find John doing the same. However, if we open the book up we see them standing together. By opening up — opening up to other human beings — we stand together, but as a closed book we lack connection. This suggestion could easily be portrayed as a criticism of neoliberal society and the notion that individualism is key to happiness: Kennedy is showing the reader that there is another way.

This leads me nicely to the epigraph: ‘The endeavour, in all branches of knowledge, is to see the object as itself it truly is’ (Mathew Arnold). There is a feeling of self-transcendence in this quote, and this is something we see beginning to happen to John: ‘he actually had been given tea — teapot, milk, sugar, cup and saucer, the petty litter of it all seeming quite confusing and pathetic, now that he examined it’. John becomes more aware of not only physical objects, but of himself. This self-awareness allows him an element of control, a separation of mind and body, for example:

John kept his fist he suddenly had fists in positions of violent stillness, cramped at the ends of his arms. He nodded neatly, like a memo-shuffler. He kept his mind in suspension, locked away from all activity and harm.

This idea of a higher state of consciousness, the power of the mind, is a key factor in the novel. With Meg, a struggling alcoholic who pushes her self-control to the limit, we find her sitting at a bar because she enjoys the atmosphere yet choosing soda water, or following her thirst into a crowded café when she is under extreme pressure, admitting to herself that she wants alcohol yet chooses a soft drink instead. Kennedy shows the reader the power of will, and that by stripping the self to the rawest and purest self, shows real courage, and hope.

Inevitably, John and Meg do meet, although not without some supercharged emotional turmoil. Connecting initially through letter-writing allows the characters to open up their inner thoughts and feeling and gives them a platform to open and honest without the restrictions of reality. This, I believe, is where hope is born.

What I find most impressive about the novel is the narrative technique. Kennedy enables the reader to explore the consciousness of her protagonists by juxtaposing the third-person limited narrator with the first-person narrator, presented in the form of italicised monologues. Visually this looks almost poetic, allowing the reader to breathe with the characters as well as understand the sporadic fragmentation of thoughts — this is very cleverly done. Despite the visceral language — which I enjoyed — I found the structure liberating. The juxtaposition of narrative voice highlights the workings of the inner mind, playing ping-pong with the outer self. As the novel gears up to its conclusion, we become aware of a transformation in the character of John Sigurdsson, as if his inner self and outer self are uniting, thus revealing his purest self: ‘John stopped — inside and out’.

Watching these two characters evolve was a real delight for me and I feel that Kennedy did the circadian novel justice. You can almost feel each character battle with their own heads while their consciousness begins to intertwine. And let us not forget those beautifully written vignettes between chapters. In *Serious Sweet*, Kennedy has written a wonderful novel.

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