‘The Brilliant & Forever’ by Kevin MacNeil

Review by Alistair Braidwood

It seemed apt to be reading Kevin MacNeil’s novel *The Brilliant & Forever* the week of the announcement of this year’s Man Booker Prize. The hoopla and hurrah that surrounds such awards was felt more keenly than usual due to Glasgow writer Graeme Macrae Burnet’s being shortlisted for the novel *His Bloody Project*, published by Scottish independent Saraband Books. As with those heady days when Scotland made football World Cup Finals, here was someone to cheer for.

With wall-to-wall media coverage, including prime-time TV shows detailing the runners and riders as well as the result, it can be argued that the importance of winning, or being listed — while understandable — is out of proportion. The danger is that an award itself becomes more important than the books and the writing. But while the importance of the Man Booker, and others of its ilk, may appear to be increasing year on year it’s nothing when compared to the high-stakes involved with ‘The Brilliant & Forever’.

Tellingly set on an island, a place where ‘everyone — human and alpaca alike — wants to be a writer’, the novel’s title refers to a yearly literary event and competition ‘where reputations are made and writers unmade’. The stakes are high, and those nominated have to compete for a panel of judges, as well as the all-important ‘People’s Decision’. The whole population attends, and bets are placed on who wins, and who may lose.

Three friends — the narrator, Macy and Archie — are set to compete. The first two are human while Archie is an alpaca. It’s strange how certain years reveal unexpected and coincidental themes in writing. In 2016 there have been a few notable and memorable talking animals, including James Robertson’s toad Mungo Forth Mungo in *To Be Continued …* and Kellan MacInnes’s faithful and

philosophical dog Tyke in his debut novel *The Making of Mickey Bell*. In *The Brilliant & Forever* it is Archie the Alpaca who is central to the story.

Alpacas are allowed to enter 'The Brilliant & Forever', but clearly this is something of a token gesture from the human lawmakers, with there being no expectation that an alpaca could actually win. Theirs is a life lived as second-class citizens, and what begins as whimsy for the reader will eventually have you feeling anger and despair as the plight of the alpaca unfolds, and the treatment of Archie after his reading quickly descends from curiosity to open hostility. Kevin MacNeil has homes in Stornoway and Kandy in Sri Lanka, and the politics and cultures of both clearly feed into the novel.

As well as being differentiated by species, there is further division between the alpacas of the north and those from the south — two tribes whose mutual animosity continues to grow. One difference is that in the north they pronounce shenanigan shenanigan, 'but in the south they pronounce shenanigan shenanigan'. This is an example of the linguistic impishness in which MacNeil excels, while at the same time making the point that such historical, and more often than not religious, feuds can be based on something as ultimately ludicrous as semantics. You have to laugh or you'd cry, and reading *The Brilliant & Forever* you'll do both. But if you don't it may be because, as Archie is prone to saying, "it's a jazz thing you don't get".

Rarely has a writer expressed their joy of language and literature with such verve as MacNeil does here. By giving us readings from all of the competing writers he has managed to come up with distinctive styles that are completely believable while parodying many successful writers and genres. You may find you think you recognise some of the competitors, and other characters, but there is just enough of MacNeil in all of them to ensure these voices don't clash or confuse. It's very clever writing — something the writer himself acknowledges when one of the competitors, Calvin O'Blyth says, "The most Brilliant & Forever book this island could create is if one chapter were written by Macy Starfield, one chapter by Summer Kelly, one chapter by me and so on …" MacNeil has written that book so they don't have to.

With *The Brilliant & Forever* Kevin MacNeil has pulled off the difficult trick of making readers laugh first, then making them think. It's rare to read a book which has me laugh out loud, but MacNeil manages it, and this makes the novel's

twists and dramatic moments more shocking when they occur. It's a novel that is philosophically interesting and engaging, examining how we consider art and culture increasingly as commodities while treating some people as if they were less then human at the same time. You may not think the two are linked, but you'd be wrong. *The Brilliant & Forever* shows Kevin MacNeil writing with insight, skill, passion and a playfulness which at times conceals an underlying exasperation and anger. It is evidence of a writer at the very top of their game.

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