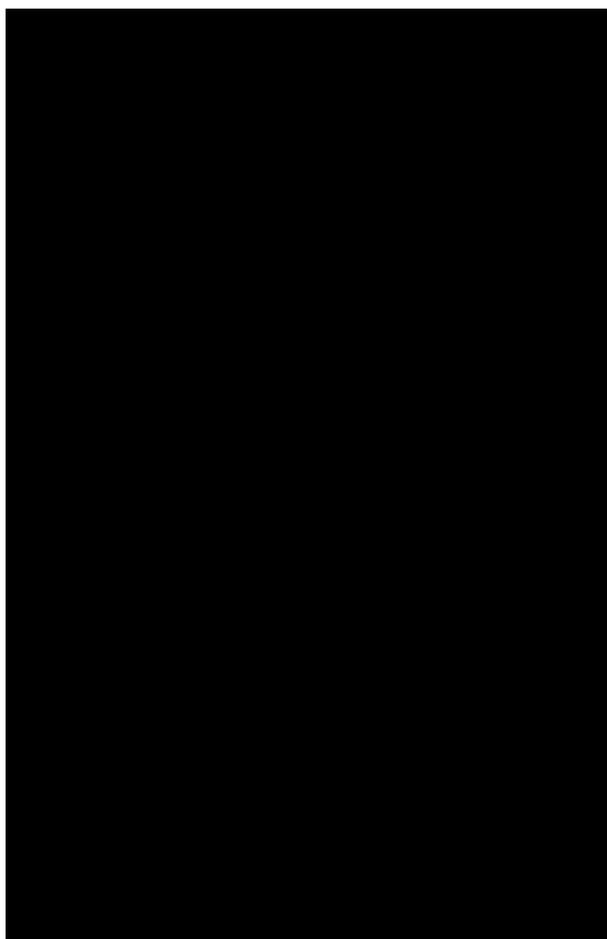


'So Glad I'm Me' by Roddy Lumsden

Review by Alison Craig



According to the blurb on *So Glad I'm Me*, this collection from Roddy Lumsden is 'lighter and less inward looking' than previous collections, his 'most optimistic and accessible book' since the *Book of Love* in 2000. Expecting of this poet some damned good poetry, and knowing that good poetry will always demand of me as the reader, I took these promotional words with a pinch of salt. However, even with my own caution ringing in my ear and having some familiarity with Lumsden's previous work, I suppose I may have approached this collection expecting a relatively quick and easy read.

In some places, I almost got that. For simple, visceral impact, I loved 'Back-up Flats', featuring the recurring character (based, I believe, on a real person) 'Amber Eyes':

*Amber Eyes is trying out her stilettos,
criss-crossing the seagrass rug ...
... Addled governess, no-go area,
maddest of lasses, marchioness of sorters,
she struts, oh bloody hell, then seeks
her back-up flats, slots them, as you do,
into a shoulder bag.*

This is punch-the-air poetry, the knowing in that feeling place in your gut that someone understands and can put it in words so much better than your own.

'Ashna Sarkar, Aged 5' was off the page and in my head and my breath before I knew it. I was right back to early bike riding - the energy, the glory of it, the milestone it placed in my developing concept of self - along with Ashna ...

*... Power ranger,
pedalling. A small big bang. A cosmic blur.
She's halfway up Ermine Street. The burn
of all future is on her and she ring rings
the bell, drops one paw from the handlebar,
salutes and sings the national anthem of herself.*

But then 'Rameses, Evita and Ghenghis / and Jehanne d'Arc and perhaps St Columba too' march through the lines. So when you look at that, it's far from simple.

And this is a feature of many of the poems, the bringing in of references to the great (and small) names of history, from pharaohs to philosophers to modern day poets and musicians. In the latter category, a goodly portion was unfamiliar to me. In fact, many allusions flew right over my head, despite my keyboard being hot with internet searching. The extra time taken to read and delve into many of these poems was always well worth the effort, but the work is so deep and rich with Lumsden's knowledge of music and poetry and the accompanying characters, history and culture that sometimes I could only ever scratch the surface, knowing that there was much more to know.

Other than the cultural embroidery that unites this collection, there are a number of key themes. I was particularly engaged and exercised by the poems that dealt with our essential one-ness, exploring whether it is possible to overcome the two-ness that we find in our lives, what it is to be 'me', how 'me' can be changed when memory jogs in, when places change and are not as we thought, and how my 'me-ness' is not the same as someone else's 'me-ness'. The irony of the title struck me very early on. The titular poem is about not the poet, but Clare, falling asleep in a pub at the end of a long night, waking up momentarily to say 'So glad I'm me'. The poem uses a list format, piling tragic heroines into Clare's words in a clever critique of both what it is to be a tragic heroine and what it is to be the 'me' that

Clare is so glad of.

And in this discovery of 'me-ness' where does the line get drawn anyway? And can we ever find unity or one-ness with anyone? Passing Pond Road explores duality and symmetry, our 'essential doubletude', its refrain ...

*uality is management, necessity. We climb
to each other, aching a little, then, rocked to rest,
yearning so blithely to be that impossible - one.*

... seeming to echo the sadness of 'Against Fucking' ...

*We are moving against each other, thoughtwise
I mean, don't edge away. A night can last
without drowning to sleep, a sorry yard apart
with awkward looks. I like it well enough.
Yet with beats on or in.*

More than this, though, is separation within the self, the difficulty of finding a constant self as time moves on and the people and places we think we knew - that helped form our identity - change, so that the self becomes divided across memory and time. There is a feeling of being almost beside oneself in life, ourselves versus the branded version of ourselves. This is expressed with humour in 'Time Loop / Wishing Wells':

*Ten minutes ago, I wrote these words.
Ten minutes; now I think I think them.
They knew me first, I fear, another me
went first and thought them. on't like
the other me, he has gained weight
and he likes Spiderman movies.*

Finally, a major theme of this collection is its inventiveness of form and expression. It comes as no surprise that Lumsden has an alternative career as a writer of quizzes and word puzzles. In this collection, there is both play with words and invention of words. Some seem like nonsense words - nestlecock, twofer, farnesol - but, within the context of a 'me', whether a particular person or

place, have their own identity and meaning. Form, too, is a playground. The list format, where phrases or words sit alone and build on each other, is used effectively throughout the collection, interspersed with more familiar poetic forms and including, in complete contrast, some longer discursive pieces. There are also the very interesting 'conflation poems', with titles like 'What Difference Does It Make? / Maybe', where one idea is looked at through the lens of another and emerges utterly changed.

In the end, *So Glad I'm Me* is everything it says on the blurb. But then, is it? This is poetry as an extreme sport, a whole world of shifting ideas with people - dead and alive - dropping in, whispering in your ear, or just walking right through, bold as brass. With such courage, beauty and complexity, it's no surprise that this, Lumsden's tenth collection, was short-listed title for the 2017 T. S. Eliot Poetry Prize. And just on that, Lumsden is no stranger to the awards scene. His first collection, *Yeah Yeah Yeah* (1997) was shortlisted for the Forward Prize and the Saltire Prize, and the *Book of Love* (2000) made the shortlist for both the T. S. Eliot and the John Llewellyn Rhys prizes. I look forward to what comes next in Lumsden's journey as a poet, and feel sure that we will continue to see his name in lights.

[*So Glad I'm Me* by Roddy Lumsden](#) is published by Bloodaxe Books, 2017.

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