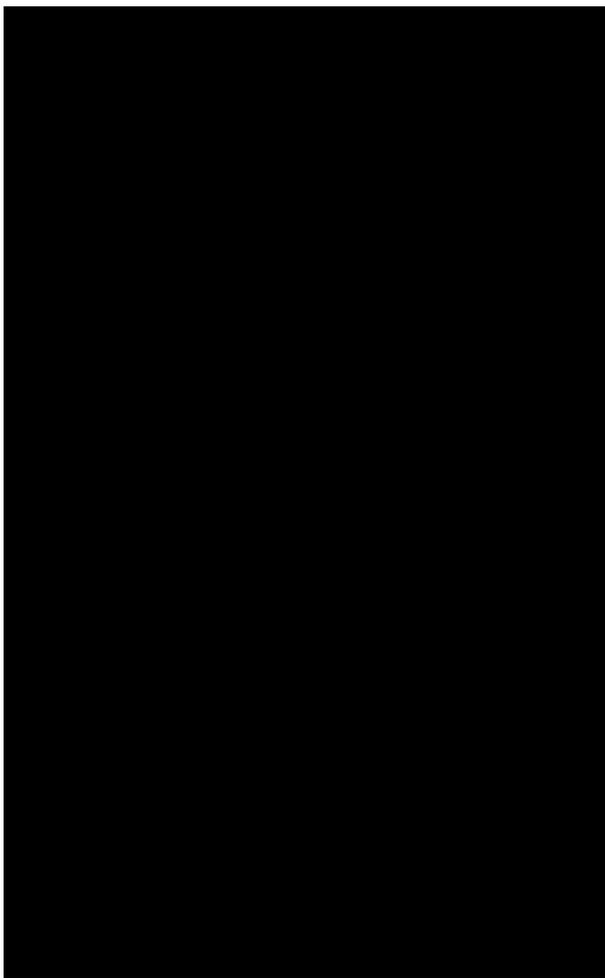


'The Fall at Home: New and Collected Aphorisms' by Don Paterson

Review by Richie McCaffery



Until this book recently came my way for review, I was unaware of poet Don Paterson's parallel life as an aphorist but having read it, I am grateful for the chance encounter. *The Fall at Home* is his third collection a New and Collected of this pithy, peppery but under-appreciated literary form. Paterson, tongue planted firmly in his cheek, is the first to acknowledge the niche-ness and hard-pressed-ness of his chosen side-line discipline, saying that a poet like himself is someone in the aphorism game for the money. At least an aphorism ranks slightly above prayer on Paterson's own hierarchy of literary forms: [d]esire and flattery are nowhere sung so nakedly. Indeed, Paterson even does his best to repel the advances of any potential reviewer. For

Paterson critics are those too clever for novels, too sceptical for poetry, too verbose for the aphorism, all that is left to them is the essay the least appropriate medium for the foiled. He warns:

Reading a book of aphorisms diligently in the sequence they

should try to finish either in one sitting.

Ill-advised as this may seem, it is precisely what I had to do with *The Fall at Home* although I agree that it would be a titanic endeavour to polish off all of Paterson's aphorisms in one sitting. This is not to say that they are in the slightest bit dull or trite, but that such books are designed for dipping into in a desultory fashion in the hope of making some illuminating discovery. To read them all one after the other is to force the brain to adjust to hundreds, if not thousands of different condensed moods, atmospheres and thought processes. The only rest the brain gets is when the eye momentarily rests upon a section

Paterson s aphorisms have little time or solace for those who believe in a maker

frustrations of his own life. One of the more enjoyable aspects of this is his undisguised schadenfreude and sometimes contempt for poetic contemporaries or upstarts, coming from his own self-deprecating view of himself:

I run into a coeval for the first time in ten years. He had become monstrously fat. I tell him, truthfully, that it is a perfect delight to see him.

You've made a blog Clever boy! Next: flushing.

Anyone whose students teach him as much as he teaches them should lose half his salary.

Other times there is the sneaking feeling that Don Paterson, one of the leading poetry lights of his generation, is kicking the ladder away from underneath him that he himself used to scale such great heights, insulting student poets and giving us some aphorisms that seem to blur the line between mock-heroics and false modesty, dismissing all interest in reviews and talking about cultivating enemies, suggesting that one needs to be important enough to have them in the first place. Even these are still funny and add to the overall eclectic rag-bag feel of the collection. On a pedantic note, I do find it rather remarkable that a publisher as estimable as Faber & Faber didn't have a proof-reader capable of spotting the mistake on page 16: Sir Peter Maxwell Davis should be Davies. I do hope, however, that with *The Fall at Home* the status and worth of the aphorism is reappraised, if not revived altogether as a valid medium, because some of Paterson's aphorisms are spot-on:

There are men and women who talk so seamlessly of themselves you wonder when they managed to listen long enough to have acquired the power of speech in the first place.

[*The Fall at Home: New and Collected Aphorisms*](#) by Don Paterson is published by Faber & Faber, 2018.