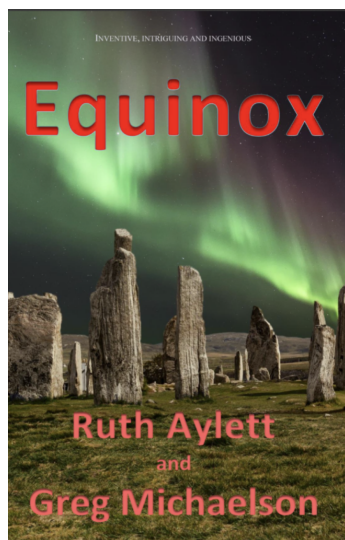


'Equinox', by Ruth Aylett and Greg Michaelson

Review by Martyn Colebrook



Stairwell Books, who have handed debuts to Ruth Aylett and Greg Michaelson for this co-authored novel, describe themselves as a publisher 'who specialises in good writing from new writers' and who emerged with a greater prominence from the pandemic. On the evidence of *Equinox* there is a talent present and considerable potential from two writers who have achieved breakthroughs in their own right with poetry and fiction respectively.

Given the profile of Stairwell, it is of little surprise that *Equinox* has been championed by the publisher. The premise - a murder mystery novel that starts in the Outer Hebrides and concludes on Rannoch Moor, cleverly interwoven with corporate malfeasance thriller and a dash of family drama thrown into the mix - means the reader is firmly in the territory of Scottish speculative fiction. There are flashes and parallels with Iain Banks's *The Crow Road* (1992) and Alan Warner's *The Man Who Walks* (2002), with this debut showing at times a great deal of promise and the development of a voice in contemporary Scottish fiction that is both exciting and energetic.

Told from multiple viewpoints, *Equinox* begins with Helen McIver, 'Hulkie' to her friends and colleagues, being summoned by the Captain of the trawler she is working on as it passes through the Hebridean Lee. The focus of their concern is

a body that has become entangled in a trawl net and brought onto the ship. It's revealed that 'Gary McMalkin' (the ID on the body) is a falsified name, and he has an intriguing green Neolithic arrowhead about his person. The second chapter introduces us to Malcolm Nicholson (Helen's cousin) and his encounter at his workplace with a mysterious woman who wants to find the same stone as that carried by Gary McMalkin. Once the woman, Patricia Harper, is believed to be dead, Malcolm goes in search of the body and finds out the area is close to the premises of Fundamental Forces, a Glaswegian company which promises to generate unlimited green energy from Rannoch Moor.

The plan laid out by Fundamental Forces is to excavate the area around Rannoch Moor, which happens to lie on a major fault line. This makes 'fracking look responsible' quips Malcolm in one of a number of scenes where the dialogue is familiar to readers of the genre, combining gentle political critique with stock in-trade characters: the maverick fire-and-brimstone local environmental activist, the accidental detectives, a technical specialist whistleblower with a PhD, and two duplicitous figures playing the situation for all they can obtain (they're American, naturally).

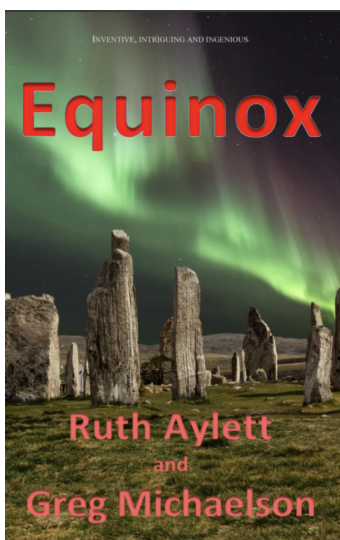
Following a tour of Fundamental Forces' buildings and operations, it transpires that their engagement with the broader community has extended to more than simply soft PR and they are bound inextricably to the landscape surrounding Rannoch. As the title suggests, *Equinox* explores the mysticism and energies at work within the Scottish landscape and the manner in which humans and said energies intersect and influence the worlds around them. A fine balancing act which, if tipped or overloaded, could move the dial on the temporal structures that underpin the fabric of the different universes at play in the novel. For a reviewer with a knowledge of science fiction and fantasy but who is not a scientist, the explanations are sufficiently convincing for me to think about Michael Moorcock and the multiverse.

The police involvement regarding the unidentified bodies extends to continued interviews and appearances at family events where inconsistencies in character witnesses' stories and individual motives are debated and reviewed at length. Thierry, the French therapist, finds himself attached to the Fundamental Forces operation given the vested interest from European partners whilst an inquisitive email from Helen to a US Professor leads to an interrogation with corporate goons. There are times when the devil really is in the detail with this novel, and

the authors' technical knowledge is to be praised, but there are also times when the action does not so much tread the fine line of implausibility but rather positively pirouettes above it.

In short, Aylett and Michaelson pack a lot into just over 220 pages, though I'm afraid to say that this is one of the shortcomings of a novel that could have been great but instead leaves the reader feeling somewhat cheated or, dare I say, hoodwinked. The finale, such as it is, feels as though it's over in a flash and leaves you questioning the time you've invested in the novel up to that point. It's the ultimate flirt, tease and go of endings. There is undoubted ability and untapped potential here and I cannot wait to read the next novel - I simply hope they give the ideas, themes and characters sufficient room to develop and space to breathe.

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