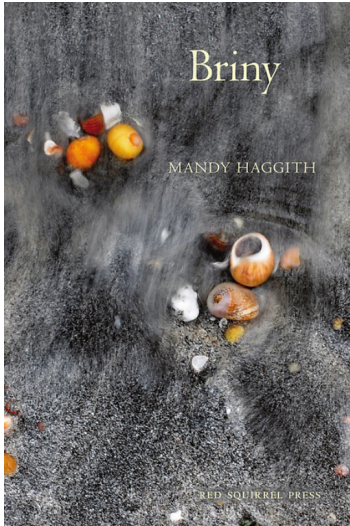


'Briny', by Mandy Haggith

Review by Matthew Macdonald



Briny, Mandy Haggith's sixth poetry collection, is a love song to the sea. The marine throughline is present from the arresting cover image – periwinkle shells in dark sand under a rush of water – and carries through in each poem across the eighty-six pages. Whether appearing as the background chorus ('The Loch'), a silent participant in a larger scene ('Fog'), a secondary protagonist ('Night at Sea') or the central figure ('Sea'), the sea remains the constant of the collection.

The sea is immediately presented to the reader as a habitat, a living place for not only flora and fauna, but also birds and animals. 'On Not Being in the Albert Hall' brings together a cormorant, heron, terns, seals and oystercatchers as if they are an orchestra preparing for a show. The poem ends with the line 'The performance is about to begin', and perform they all do – sea, sea-life and sea-poet.

In what is perhaps a nod to the seven oceans of the world, Haggith collects her poems under seven broader themes. The sections 'Underway' and 'Passage' both feature poems detailing sailing, or being on and travelling across the ocean; the poems of 'Loch Roe' focus on animals and plants of the water; in 'Thule', the poems dip under the surface to investigate how human-driven climate change is now altering the bodies of water that keep the earth alive. The reality of the climate crisis is a troubling presence in the collection –

spacing out the steps

*of polar survival —
impulse, momentum and efficiency*

*balance on shrinking ice,
the impossibility of waste
on the far edge of scarcity.*

(‘Polar Bears’)

- yet Haggith still manages to make *Briny* a celebration of the sea, her unromanticised but beloved subject. The collection is not, however, one of watergazing - despite the central focus running through *Briny*, the poems are biographical and intimate in tone, with each one offering the impression of a snapshot of a memory, moment, or lived experience, but one which is still anchored to the sea through Haggith’s evocative use of imagery and language:

*I find myself beached above the fluids
that have bathed me all my life*

Strong, steady, solid, I withstand all the ocean can throw at me

(‘Menopause’)

Just as the sea contains life, so too does it ‘contain’ the topics that Haggith brings to the fore. Aside from the range of subjects that Haggith deftly incorporates in these watery poems - from the pressures of a world being destroyed by our own actions in the genuinely haunting ‘The Volume of 1kg of CO₂ is Roughly the Same as That of a Coffin’ to the lyrical painting of the world in poems like ‘Svitjodbreen’ - the collection also balances a wide range of tones. ‘19 January’ deals with grief, ‘Fog’ is a love poem of ice-flake fragility, and there is comedy from poems like ‘You Wouldn’t Want to Wrestle with a Walrus’.

Much of what lies under the surface of this collection of sea-poems is hidden from first glance. Like the sea itself, *Briny* holds a whole world of unexplored depths, hidden creatures and moments of almost inexpressible uniqueness. This is a wonderful collection of poems that both explores, exhibits and inhabits the seas that Haggith evidently holds so dear:

*The sound of the sea is so appealing
the sight forbidding, grey and flecked with teeth.
This paradox of love and fear,
epitome of wildness.*

(‘Gannets’)

Briny is published by Red Squirrel Press



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