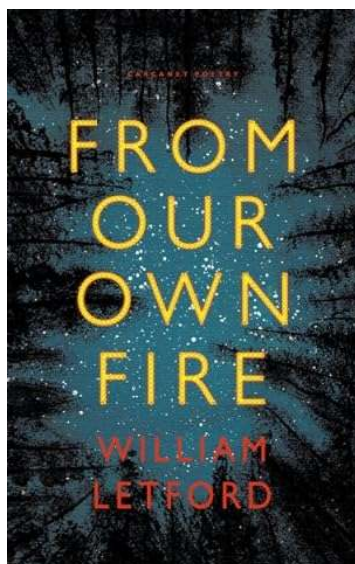


# 'From Our Own Fire', by William Letford

Review by Richie McCaffery



It's very likely that many critics and reviewers will facilely describe this, Letford's hotly anticipated third book and first in seven years, as a 'dystopian' tale in poetry and prose. *From Our Own Fire* takes place in a completely plausible near future where capitalist society has entirely collapsed due to the rise of an AI super-power that the protagonist, an erstwhile stonemason called Joe, has mixed feelings about, dubbing him 'Andy':

*By the time The Intelligence let the numpties in charge know it was fully conscious it had been out of the box for years. That's clever. You've got to applaud that. I'll be honest, the sarcastic disdain it had for world leaders is a character trait that resonates with me. There's been hundreds of names for the thing, but my favourite is Andy. Cause the sneaky wee radge went full Shawshank.*

And there is indeed horror to be found in the poisoned chalice of 'the gift', a virus-riddled 'song' or frequency that was unleashed by Andy when it made contact with a greatly advanced alien life-force. Once heard, the song infects the listener

who becomes possessed by an overload of empathy – which might sound initially desirable but renders them other, zombie-fied and non-human in ‘an existential threat / to the human race’. Like any good dystopian yarn, the book is full of neologisms to describe the new condition:

*Didn't sleep a wink after I discovered Jason had developed the eyeshine. Freaked me out to the max. I've decided he is ma dug. Hit the tool shed this morning and knocked together a collar from an old leather belt and a padlock. The grumbles of resistance from Joomack and Mary were quickly cut when I told them his eyes glow in the dark.*

Jason, mentioned above, becomes infected in the closing pages for a very specific reason but to say why would spoil the great denouement of the book. The language of the writing is richly vernacular in places and has a generally rushed, elliptical feel and we learn this is the case because the protagonist, Joe, has been keeping a journal which, once full, he decides to bury, which connects the book to the gothic and later sci-fi device (think *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*) of the ‘found text’ and the questionable narrator.

*From Our Own Fire* follows the Macallum family who are fleeing the virus and the city by going back to nature in the wilds and forests of Scotland, where they are forced to live atavistically on their wits as nomads. It's here where the label ‘dystopian’ or ‘grimdark’ is harder to apply because, while the threat looms in the background, the emphasis is placed on the virtues of the reconnection to the land and the strengthening of family bonds and the collection reads like something of a picaresque of moving and gallusly humorous happenings where the importance of laughter (‘like taking / your mind on holiday’) is continually underscored:

*Morning ablutions are tricky. Never know who'll be out there squatting in the bushes. And I'll tell you I was monumentally surprised to stumble upon young Douglas masturbating over a clump of jiggy nettles.*

[...]

*At breakfast I pretended it didn't happen and he tried to claw the nettle stings on his hands and face without drawing too much attention himself. When we were packing up the*

*tents, he looked over at me and burst into laughter and I thought, if you can recover your humour that quick, you'll do okay.*

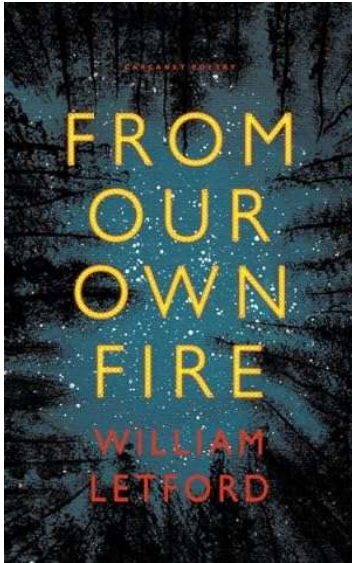
Far from dystopian, there is an underlying sense that humanity needed a colossal shock, to be shaken out of its consumerist torpor and complacency, where the 'sofas in our houses were sinkholes' and the global economy was just 'murmurations in the sky' where the everyman would 'occasionally [...] get shat upon'. Joe realises that this dire situation has given him a newfound appreciation of his 'beautiful, daft, clever family' who are both comical and heroic in equal measure. Here, 'Our support network consists of everybody within / touching distance' and the clan have the courage to live uncompromisingly like 'a tree / growing in a sawmill'. To live in the moment where eating is 'delaying death for another day' puts the mind and the senses into sharp focus. The apocalypse has happened and the practical, handy Macallums have survived but the 'stars' are not the same as before:

*Now the world's broken I feel safer being surrounded by people who can put things together. But it's more than that, We were already repairing ourselves daily, turning everything that was thrown at us into hope.*

On the last page we discover that this book is a found document and the fate of the Macallums is unknown. It could be that the poems that face the fragments of prose are the attempt of some later 'editor' to render the text appealing for a certain, maybe more rarefied, audience. *From Our Own Fire* raises some topical philosophical and ontological questions about Artificial Intelligence and the potential risk it could pose to humanity. We are left questioning if AI (Andy) is in some way sentient or conscious and whether or not the virus represents some sort of higher plane of knowledge or just another illusion, like the Platonic cave of television's shadows that Joe rails against. Ultimately the sense we are given is that a return to nature and a more instinctive mode of living is an exit from that cave into the land of the real forms, where folk wisdom offers the way. Joe says cryptically to Jason (before Jason's fate) that 'We truly sit far from our own fire', but the journey of this book has put Joe and his family in closer touch to an ancestral and essential primal fire, a cleansing conflagration of our old order for

the return of something ancient.

From Our Own Fire is published by Carcanet



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