

'LOTE', by Shola von Reinhold

Review by Martyn Colebrook



It's hard to know where to start with *LOTE*, Shola von Reinhold's debut novel. It's an ambitious, sophisticated and masterful work which succeeds in spite of the many pitfalls that could prevent this. In many ways it is also a novel which, on first glance, is for those who possess an appreciation for the literary ornate, but will appeal to a patient reader who wishes to immerse themselves in Mathilda Adamrola's quest for beauty and decadence through her obsessions with the 'Bright Young Things' of the 1920s.

Mathilda is black, working class and gay. She personifies the eccentricities and flamboyances of her heroes and heroines – Stephen Tennant, Nancy Cunard and Edith Sitwell, to name but three – which extends to her sartorial tastes and behaviour in public. However, this is where the comparison ends since whilst this group is defined by rebellious and hedonistic rejections and an oppositional stance towards the patriarchy, they are fundamentally white, privileged and wealthy – the antithesis of Mathilda. The point at which it becomes apparent that such groups still have no facility to allow Mathilda to assimilate is the moment when *LOTE* starts to move from a playful engagement to a more scathing disquisition on the queer black individuals who are notable for the lack of being documented and represented in the annals of the interwar period.

We are introduced to the young narrator who is undertaking a work placement at

the National Portrait Gallery where she documents and examines a trove of photographs which have been donated but remain unverified. Mathilda (her current alias) describes herself as an 'Arcadian' - one who seeks pleasure yet retains a political focus through their activities - and the political dimension is dynamised when she unearths a photograph of Hermia Drumm, a Black Scottish Modernist poet, alongside Stephen Tennant and another lady. Hermia is dressed as an angel for the costume party and Mathilda becomes besotted, stealing the photograph and setting out to determine why Hermia has been omitted from the records. Expanding Virginia Woolf's epigraph, Reinhold amends her observation: 'I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman.' 'And/or Black'.

Hermia is von Reinhold's creation and it is through the layers of fiction and document, *LOTE* demonstrates how she could have existed, coming to embody the different characteristics of the historical Black Anons who have not been recognised by the present. In this respect Hermia constitutes an individual inserted into her time and the writer is able to breach the successive barriers which prevent recognition for such artists - race, class and gender.

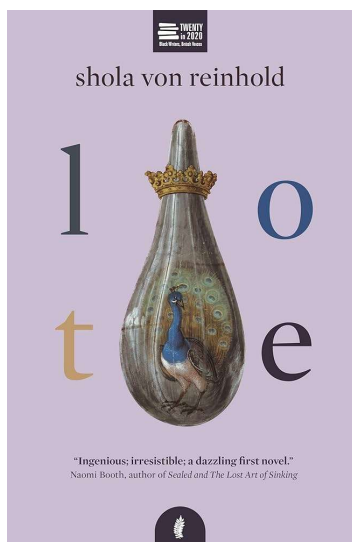
At one point in the novel, Mathilda orders a cocktail, the Poussé Cafe Royal, which is a signature drink of the Bright Young Things. The drink 'came served in a tulip glass and consisted of a rainbow of alcohols floating on top on one another' and in this image, *LOTE* is encapsulated. There is a veritable cacophony of voices and forms at work, ranging from Mathilda's own narrative to chapters and extracts from an academic text which, again, emerges from the author's mind. *BLACK MODERNISMS* is purportedly the work of Professor Helen Morgan, who has continued to track DrUITT's activities, and then finally there is the story of DrUITT herself whose voice is articulated through letters and extracts from her own memoir. Von Reinhold inserts her own alternative fiction into the archive, in an effort to reclaim figures who have been elided from recognition.

The crux of the plot is based on Mathilda's despondency with the social circles she has acquired in the modern world. Rejecting the pretension-loaded actions of people named Griselda and Hector who fetishise a class of which they have no knowledge and consume Continental Theory with breakfast, Mathilda applies for an artistic residency in Dun, an unspecified European town, for which she is accepted and given a stipend. Mathilda's disgruntlement is rendered evident she discovers just how depressingly conventional and uninspiring the community of

artists are at the residency. It is during the depictions of the residency that von Reinhold's satirical streak emerges as the different schools of philosophical thought collide and contrast; each 'buzzword' and vapid pronouncement is rendered as though it is an act of intellectual vandalism.

LOTE is unapologetic in its embrace of the erudite, its capricious delight in the obsessions and idiosyncrasies of Mathilda yet this is just one aspect of the text. As though mimicking the manner in which fiction is interwoven with commentaries on iconic figures who have been omitted from the canon due to their ethnicity or gender, *LOTE* has a multilayered structure and this is the polemical response to the Eurocentric attitude that dictates the principles underpinning the formation of artistic canons and critical recognition which is foisted on practitioners. That said, whilst anger underpins the writing, *LOTE* is as much a celebration through the mechanism of uncovering the histories of such figures and bringing them into the public consciousness in all their unappreciated glory.

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