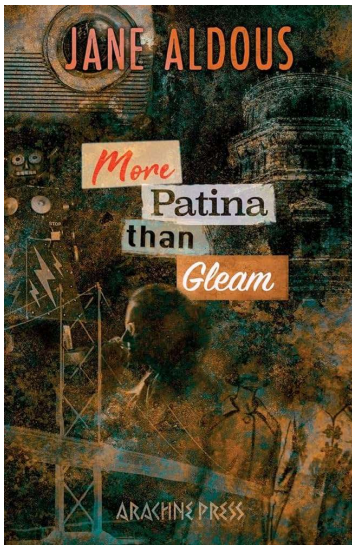


'More Patina than Gleam', by Jane Aldous

Review by Richie McCaffery



More Patina than Gleam marks Jane Aldous's seventieth birthday in the form of seventy connected sonnets that make up an alternative history of her early life, a poetic novella of sorts. The book imagines a mother, Linda, fleeing an abusive relationship in England and seeking refuge in the genteel poverty of a large Edinburgh house where she serves as a 'lady's companion'. The cast of players presents a very matriarchal menage where men are often fringe characters or suspicious intruders. Aldous's choice of free verse sonnets is apt because they represent the protagonist Linda's escape from the ties and constraints of a toxic relationship. Vernon, Linda's violent husband, rears his ugly head a few times in the course of the book, slowly changing from a fearful bully to a figure of impotence and pity. At first Linda and her daughter Ange are treated like lost possessions, with an ad in the paper: '*Missing woman and child reward offered*'. Vernon hunts the pair down but the solidarity of the women sharing the house prevents him from getting very far. In the end, he is left at Waverley Station:

*Ange sighed Let's go home mother and
daughter said their goodbyes Ange glanced*

*back there he was a small man cracking
jokes a lion tamer whipping his latest conquest
(from 'Last Chance Saloon')*

It is interesting to note that as the book goes on Linda's language begins to become permeated by the odd Scots word, reflecting her assimilation into her adopted home.

The language of the poems themselves is prosaic and unpunctuated with almost breathless sound pauses making them feel like diary entries written hurriedly and in secret:

*now here I am paid companion more intimate
than friend wielding bicarbonate of soda Vim
black lead and bleach in a house held together
with more patina than gleam I think
you have to love a house to clean it
every awkward bit or else it never is
(from 'Gleam')*

It is not just Linda's personal trauma that is explored here, but rather the collective trauma of the legacy of the war and the interweaving narratives of the other people she shares the rambling Edinburgh townhouse with, such as worldly and handy fellow-lodger Rose with whom she shares a budding but strictly clandestine romantic relationship. It's worth noting that same sex physical relationships remained illegal in Scotland until 1980s, and this book is set in the 1960s:

*[...] a door slammed and Rose joined
her pushed her body next to hers held*

*on as if she were a lifebuoy as if both of
them would drown without the other
[...] with little money little privacy always
feeling out of place even here and
something was burning on the stove
(from 'Something and Nothing')*

Linda is not the only haunted figure in the book with skeletons in her closet. Another major revelation is that Elsie Datlow, Linda's eccentric host, is involved in a decidedly illicit enterprise, that of forging artworks by famous painters, but she in the end severs all ties with that shady part of her family: 'she told him she didn't / want to be part of his business any more'. However, the fake Frida Kahlo self-portrait that hangs in the hallway has a talismanic quality and becomes something of a symbol of Linda's drive to survive:

*then I noticed her face once she'd have
been a bobby-dazzler I've felt like that
she's fed up at a dead loss her heart's
broken her body too something inside
is keeping her going
(from 'Looking at Frida Kahlo')*

Ultimately we are left with the image of a colourful house of empowered women who have not let the unfortunate vicissitudes of their past lives wear them down or eat them up. The book does not neatly resolve itself but instead ends on a note of hopeful uncertainty:

*[...] yesterday I gave
Rose a gold ring I'd dug up on Randall's plot*

she's wearing it for me for both of us

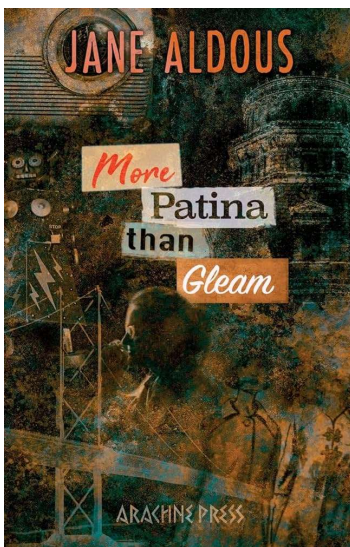
and that's more than enough maybe one day

we'll feel like proper people

(from 'Enough')

At times this collection, which manages to pack in questions of race, gender, sexism, Jewishness and gayness, can feel a little contrived but regardless, with *More Patina than Gleam* Jane Aldous has succeeded in producing a compelling period verse-novella. The closing poem is a plea for readerly empathy, social charity and, crucially, belonging, how we all have hidden depths and troubles that are perhaps not immediately, superficially obvious. But we all want to feel accepted somewhere, feel that perhaps we deserve a chance at 'another life' when we are denied the sacred right to just be ourselves.

More Patina than Gleam is published by Arachne Press



More Patina than Gleam marks Jane Aldous's seventieth birthday in the form of seventy connected sonnets that make up an alternative history of her early life, a poetic novella of sorts. The book imagines a mother, Linda, fleeing an abusive relationship in England and seeking refuge in the genteel poverty of a large Edinburgh house where she serves as a 'lady's companion'. The cast of players presents a very matriarchal menage where men are often fringe characters or suspicious intruders. Aldous's choice of free verse sonnets is apt because they represent the protagonist Linda's escape from the ties and constraints of a toxic

relationship. Vernon, Linda's violent husband, rears his ugly head a few times in the course of the book, slowly changing from a fearful bully to a figure of impotence and pity. At first Linda and her daughter Ange are treated like lost possessions, with an ad in the paper: *'Missing woman and child reward offered'*. Vernon hunts the pair down but the solidarity of the women sharing the house prevents him from getting very far. In the end, he is left at Waverley Station:

*Ange sighed Let's go home mother and
daughter said their goodbyes Ange glanced
back there he was a small man cracking
jokes a lion tamer whipping his latest conquest*
(from 'Last Chance Saloon')

It is interesting to note that as the book goes on Linda's language begins to become permeated by the odd Scots word, reflecting her assimilation into her adopted home.

The language of the poems themselves is prosaic and unpunctuated with almost breathless sound pauses making them feel like diary entries written hurriedly and in secret:

*now here I am paid companion more intimate
than friend wielding bicarbonate of soda Vim
black lead and bleach in a house held together
with more patina than gleam I think
you have to love a house to clean it
every awkward bit or else it never is*
(from 'Gleam')

It is not just Linda's personal trauma that is explored here, but rather the collective trauma of the legacy of the war and the interweaving narratives of the other people she shares the rambling Edinburgh townhouse with, such as worldly and handy fellow-lodger Rose with whom she shares a budding but strictly clandestine romantic relationship. It's worth noting that same sex physical relationships remained illegal in Scotland until 1980s, and this book is set in the 1960s:

*[...] a door slammed and Rose joined
her pushed her body next to hers held
on as if she were a lifebuoy as if both of
them would drown without the other
[...] with little money little privacy always
feeling out of place even here and
something was burning on the stove
(from 'Something and Nothing')*

Linda is not the only haunted figure in the book with skeletons in her closet. Another major revelation is that Elsie Datlow, Linda's eccentric host, is involved in a decidedly illicit enterprise, that of forging artworks by famous painters, but she in the end severs all ties with that shady part of her family: 'she told him she didn't / want to be part of his business any more'. However, the fake Frida Kahlo self-portrait that hangs in the hallway has a talismanic quality and becomes something of a symbol of Linda's drive to survive:

*then I noticed her face once she'd have
been a bobby-dazzler I've felt like that
she's fed up at a dead loss her heart's
broken her body too something inside
is keeping her going*

(from 'Looking at Frida Kahlo')

Ultimately we are left with the image of a colourful house of empowered women who have not let the unfortunate vicissitudes of their past lives wear them down or eat them up. The book does not neatly resolve itself but instead ends on a note of hopeful uncertainty:

[...] yesterday I gave

Rose a gold ring I'd dug up on Randall's plot

she's wearing it for me for both of us

and that's more than enough maybe one day

we'll feel like proper people

(from 'Enough')

At times this collection, which manages to pack in questions of race, gender, sexism, Jewishness and gayness, can feel a little contrived but regardless, with *More Patina than Gleam* Jane Aldous has succeeded in producing a compelling period verse-novella. The closing poem is a plea for readerly empathy, social charity and, crucially, belonging, how we all have hidden depths and troubles that are perhaps not immediately, superficially obvious. But we all want to feel accepted somewhere, feel that perhaps we deserve a chance at 'another life' when we are denied the sacred right to just be ourselves.

More Patina than Gleam is published by Arachne Press

(c) The Bottle Imp