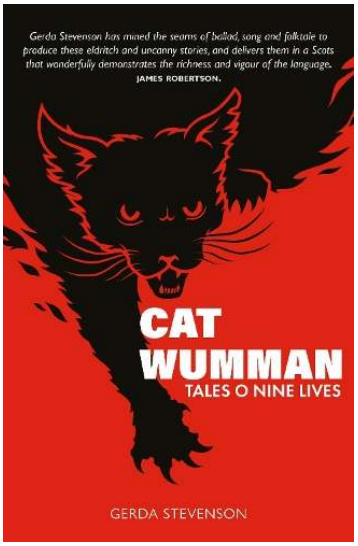
‘Cat Wumman: Tales o Nine Lives’, by Gerda Stevenson

Review by Fiona Paterson



Gerda Stevenson’s short stories in her latest collection, *Cat Wumman: Tales o Nine Lives*, range from the haunting – in depictions of unsettling dalliances with the supernatural – to the comforting – in the exploration of human relationships guided by connection and hope. Narratives that are, on the one hand, thoughtful reflections on universal themes (life, death, love and loss) are injected with the absurd, rendering the familiar strange and shining light on the quirks of ordinary lives. Everyday experience, as Stevenson depicts it, is shown to be both intimately recognisable and quietly uncanny.

Her use of Scots throughout the collection anchors the stories firmly in Scottish cultural and folk traditions, echoing the ballads and songs with which Stevenson is so familiar. At the same time, she demonstrates expertly how this linguistic inheritance can be modernised and brought up to speed with contemporary concerns and contexts, without the loss of authenticity. The Scots vocabulary and cultural references that are drawn on feel entirely natural within modern settings, aided by epigraphs and subtitles that situate each story within the broader tradition. In tales that cover a selection of what can only be called largely *odd* experiences, Scots does not make the encounters strange but rather reaffirms their local relevance, bringing them home.

Across the nine stories Stevenson's characters grapple with various questions of identity, many of which are left unresolved. In 'The Tither Side', the protagonist Adam struggles with the predicament of his identity – 'I wisnae masel'' (15) – and the alienation that he feels is exacerbated by his attendance at a family wedding. This only improves when he is quite literally displaced from the environment and himself, transported by a mysterious guest into another realm where he lives as a woman. In this alternate existence, Adam 'felt I'd come hame' (19), blessed with a new body and a new mindset. Even after returning, accused by others of telling tall tales, he maintains this newfound faith in his identity: 'Whitiver cam tae pass the nicht, it's nae lee. It's the truth' (23). Adam finds comfort in the unexplainable as Stevenson crafts a story within a story, a world within a world.

Weddings recur as the settings for transformative supernatural encounters. In 'Cat Wumman' the protagonist is also thrown off-kilter after a wedding, although in this case it is herself tying the knot. Upon marrying a man she 'haurdly kent' (87), her relationship deteriorates rapidly, resulting in her physical and emotional transformation. In 'The Waddin Guest', Billy is his girlfriend's plus-one to a wedding on a Greek island, where he, like Adam, meets a mysterious storyteller. As the man's story unfolds, the boundaries between fiction and reality merge and melt together, leaving Billy disoriented – 'Bi this time, I've tint aa sense o whaur I am – I'm in his story'. (69) Unnerved by what he witnesses, Billy's return to reality unsettles those around him and raises questions for the reader (much like 'dumfoonert' (74) Fran) about how these worlds collided and where to go next.

Elsewhere, shadowy figures intrude upon and disrupt the rhythms of ordinary life. The titular boy in 'Birdie Boy', for instance, emerges from obscure origins – 'Naebody kent whaur the laddie hud cam frae' (99) – and drifts through the narrative with no indication of belonging or attachment: 'Birdie Boy, wi his corbie on his shoother, wannert awa, hameless, tae the brunt wids, the tither side o the loch.' (103) His presence, like that of many of the other 'outsider' characters that Stevenson depicts in the collection, offers insight into the ways in which individuals are othered and excluded due to their perceived eccentricities. In a similar vein, 'The Witch' is not really about a witch at all, but about a misunderstood and ostracised older woman. Stevenson's engagement with folklore and the supernatural is as much a critique of social attitudes as an exploration of popular motifs and ideas in the storytelling tradition.

Ageing and mortality form another central thread in the collection, especially in

the stories of older women whose lives become entangled with the fantastical. In ‘Braid an Narrow’, for instance, Ailsa navigates the difficult ‘shift frae pairtner tae carer’ (55), before adjusting to the rediscovery of her independence after loss. Time, and the transformations that it brings, is a persistent concern, as articulated in ‘Warlds Apairt’: ‘Time’s a gey unco thing. When bairns look at an auld tree… they dinnae think o the rings inside – aa thae hidden years’ (77). When the protagonist slips into the ‘kinna unnerwarld’ (80) beneath the floor of her care home, she finds her reality entirely subverted and experiences a newfound autonomy and respect: ‘I’m mair auld nor ony o them, but they’re treatin me like I’m ryalty’ (81).

Here and in other stories Stevenson suggestively infers the presence of an afterlife in the depiction of dreamlike environments. Having opened the collection with disorientation and unease – ‘I wisnae masel’ – Stevenson brings it to a close with the reassurance of a lullaby or bedtime story, as the main character in the final story, ‘Kilmeny’, rises above their reality and proceeds, calm and composed, into a kind of afterlife that goes beyond what is known and established – ‘we’re sailin, heich abuin the gllen an its bens o yowdendrift, tae the muir streetched oot afore us, fauld on fauld on fauld’ (118). Even when faced with new and unsettling circumstances, Stevenson encourages her characters – and her readers – to be resilient and adaptable, and to harness their imagination and creativity in the manifestation of continuities rather than endings.

Ultimately, *Cat Wumman* shows that the ordinary is found within the strange and the strange within the ordinary. Stevenson’s stories reveal the overlapping nature of reality and the supernatural, illustrating how both truth and fiction continually coexist within everyday life. Through her use of Scots and her engagement with folklore, Stevenson embeds her stories within tradition whilst refreshing this very tradition through the injection of modern characters, settings, and concerns. Considering each story individually and the collection as a whole, at once touching and peculiar, what shines through is the value that Stevenson places on storytelling, integrah to the shaping of cultural memory and the construction of personal and communal identities, a reminder that we all have stories inside us – stories that should be told.

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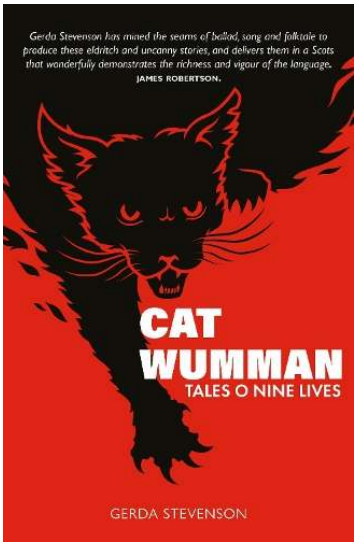

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