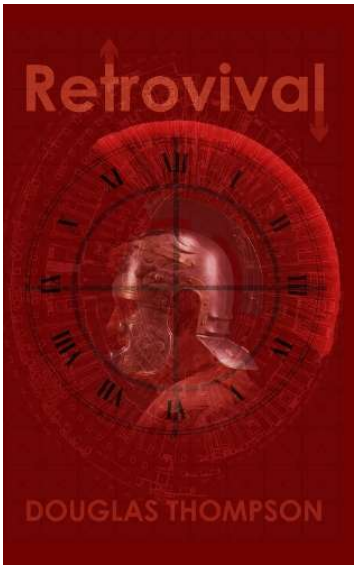
‘Retrovival’, by Douglas Thompson

Review by David Manderson



Douglas Thompson may well be the most significant Scottish author you’ve yet to read, although for the last twenty years or so he has brought out more than one book a year. I went walking with him in Glasgow’s south side in September to find out more about his latest novel.

‘How many books have you published altogether?’ I ask. ‘It’s hard to say’, he answers. ‘About 21 or 22, I think.’ The latest, entitled – at least, for the moment – *The Apparatus of Yearning,* will appear soon, brought out by a German publisher, he adds. As we set out on our journey up the hill to the flagpole, I wonder out loud how, in an industry where publication is sought-after but rarely found, he’s been successful?

‘It’s got something to do with genre,’ he answers after a few paces, ‘and capitalism.’ By that he doesn’t mean, he goes on, that his books are written to sell in huge amounts, but that he goes about writing them in ways that try to resist how the publishing industry favours what’s already been done. This has led to his books being seen as outside the mainstream and different from most others.

Douglas’s books are part of the genre known as ‘speculative fiction’. As its precursor, science fiction, became jaded and associated with younger teenage readers from the 1960s onward, adult audiences began to avoid it, but its decline

sparked another revival. Those authors whose fiction dealt with magic, philosophical ideas, psychological depth and humanist insights began to sell more, while prejudice towards the populist version hardened. ‘So no more Amazing Worlds then?’ I ask. ‘Not at all’, Douglas answers, smiling. ‘The more amazing worlds the better.’

From the way he talks as we head uphill towards the Glasshouses on Queen’s Park hill, it’s clear that there is a seriousness about speculative fiction that science fiction lost. While the older form began to recycle clichés and myths taken from other genres such as mysteries and even westerns, new kinds of future worlds were being created to examine philosophical questions in the updated genre, of which Douglas’s *The Brahan Seer*(Acair Books, 2014) is an outstanding example. Margaret Elphinstone, some of whose books are similar in outlook to Douglas’s, says of it, ‘What does the Brahan Seer actually *do*?’, because it is clear from Douglas’s novel that the ‘Scottish Nostradamus’ is the least free and, of all people, the most trapped within his own prophesies. That story is no light, entertaining fantasy but a sensitive and deeply ironic piece of adult fiction. Taking these kinds of tales as their lead, writers like Ursula Le Guin in *Lathe of Heaven* (1971), Margaret Atwood in *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and Nina Allan, who is based today in Bute, extended the new speculative genre. Today, publishers release tales of this kind across the world, with Douglas’s most recent books published in Bucharest, São Paulo, Santa Fe, London and Dusseldorf.

His latest offering, *Retrovival* (Elsewhen Press, 2025), is set in a part of the universe closer to home. His route towards it was through an arts project designed to raise awareness of the Antonine Wall, built around the year AD 142 by the Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius. Today the Wall runs through five local west of Scotland authorities, including a large piece of East Dunbartonshire which includes the towns of Bearsden and Milngavie, where Douglas spent his formative years, and also Westerton village, where I spent mine. *All Along the Edge*, the collection that resulted from this project, edited by Zoe Strachan, included poems by James MacGonigal, Tawana Sithole, A. C. Clarke, the much-loved and greatly mourned Leela Soma, author of *Murder at the Mela* (Ringwood, 2020) and two poems by Douglas, among many other authors. *Retrovival*sprang from this experience of people walking the Wall and exploring it in writing, and it sets out its moral territory through a narrative about bringing the preserved bodies of Roman soldiers, drowned centuries ago in the bogs, back to life. The justification

for this is ‘progress’, and the book looks steadily at the destruction of communities, indigenous peoples and human decency by a society which values its own ideas but not human life. There is much talk of honour and patriotic dignity in a future nationalist state, mostly from Fiona Drest, a newly elected far-right President of Scotland (‘her hour come round at last’) who has recently freed Northumberland from the heel of the English jackboot by invading it. As part of a campaign of ‘national cleansing’, she has recently launched a series of ‘extra-judicial’ (or ‘criminal’) murders of immigrants who try to flee from the war in England. Almost the first thing we see is the shooting of a baby and its mother by a Scottish soldier at the border. We learn too of the massacre of Glaswegians at ‘Freedom Square’ by ‘Sassens’, the shortened form used to dehumanise the state’s perceived enemies. In this radicalised land, the kind of personal testimony which seems most valued are the images in the memory banks of a long-dead centurion, Caius Flavius, which, scraped from his calcified brain, are prized in a society where everyday human experience is worth little. Cruelty is the norm in this proud new nation, atrocities barely worth mentioning and noticed only in passing, like the entrails of a recently captured Roman soldier spread-eagled over a rock for a ceremony; ‘long red tubes like tree roots teased out towards the four compass points.’

Retrovival’s cover has been designed by Douglas, resembling a ‘mandala’, a geometric pattern of symbols, visual images being at the centre of how he writes. Mandala designs operate in four sections, as did a recent innovative anthology in which Douglas, Margaret Elphinstone, Mandy Haggith and D. P. Watt collaborated (‘Lost Eden’, Zagava, 2023). It is from there that *Lost People* by Margaret Elphinstone (reviewed in *The Bottle Imp*) emerged to be shortlisted in last year’s Saltire Awards. The speculative form can also move beyond traditional boundaries between books.

In her Afterword in Douglas’s book, Margaret Elphinstone examines the meaning of *Retrovival* closely. Reviving the past is nothing new, she finds; in fact, any politician can claim to be doing it, and in doing so re-write it. ‘The past is constantly dug up, and abused, by different agendas.’ Caius the centurion, and the adopted barbarian daughter of a Roman patrician he is contracted to teach Latin, a Damnonii princess, both have visions for the future and almost survive, but the mud drags them down. Yet their visions may live on. As Douglas and me descend the other side of the park by the Battlefield monument, I remember

knowing him years ago when he led the Scottish Writers Centre at the CCA through probably its most productive period. Both the centre and the organisation are now gone, but Douglas's vision continues, fired by his beliefs and his imagination.

One other book by this remarkable author. *Gateway to the Bird Kingdom* (Mount Abraxas, 2024) is not so much about a place as a person, Douglas's brother, the artist Ally Thompson. Brought up in Milngavie, Ally was considered 'born too close to himself' by his father and some school teachers. At Art School his talent swiftly identified him as one of the New Glasgow Boys, alongside Peter Howson, Stephen Campbell, Adrian Wieznifsky and Ken Currie, but he was failed by rapacious agents, an addiction to alcohol and his own crippling shyness. His landscapes show surreal glades of moonlit trees, skies full of stars and a landscape of small roads and lanes walked by isolated, crushed-looking figures. All the members of the New Glasgow Boys spoke of their sorrow when Ally died in 2016, and *Bird Kingdom* ends with a poem, *Gallery*, dedicated to him by Douglas, a writer who has found his vision and knows the regenerative silence of those who do not.

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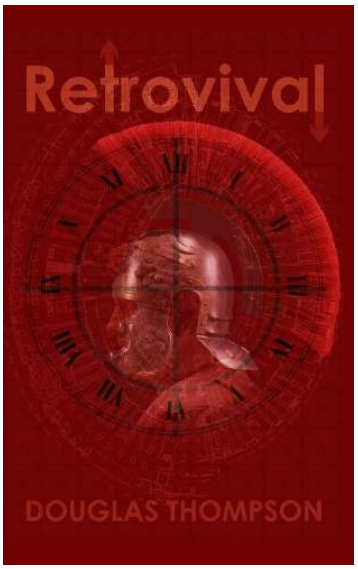

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