



SHAMANIC POET

Bright Pink Ink: A Review

Bright Pink Ink (Laura DiNovis Berry, 2018) is my first exposure to Laura's work, and I found here a delightfully fresh voice. On my first read-through, done in one sitting, the first two poems in this collection – *Prince? Princess?* and *Ruined Books* – did put me slightly on the back foot as I struggled to get to grips with the rhythm, the tone, even the subject matter. It's a brave move to put what are arguably the most dense and difficult pieces right at the start, a strategy (if that's indeed what it is) that requires the reader to knuckle down and commit from the get-go and, conversely, risks losing the less dedicated reader early on. It reminds me of the start of my MBA course where they threw us straight into three straight months of statistics and accounting – Laura separates her readers into wheat and chaff in the first two pages!

It would be unfair to say the poems get 'easier' from then onwards, but they do get more accessible in terms of subject and structure. The surface humour in *Spit* conceals (a little) the damage and the heartbreak that can be created by unthinking parents putting their offspring into one or other gender box from the day they pop out. A poem from 4/14/2015 read on 6/21/2017 reminded me of Christopher Nolan's movie *Memento* (2000) in that it is essentially two poems beautifully interwoven with one another, with lines repeated to devastating effect.

Call and Response is a nicely crafted poem that begins in humour about Laura's forthcoming marriage to a marine, moves through shades of concern about a potentially ill-starred match, and ends on a resolutely determined note: "He's worth it. / He's worth it. / He's worth it." A partner poem, written from the other side of the wedding, is *Waiting for the First Deployment*, and really hits a sensitive spot where, even for readers like me who will never experience such a thing, truly gets across a strong sense of the mass of mixed emotions coursing through both the "warfighter in your prime" and the girl who is asking "How would I occupy that time / Made of minutes slower than sloths?" (I like that the word "occupy" is in there, echoing the potential nature of the deployment of the marine to a foreign land).

Another poem that touched me from a place I'll never be is *Banned Words Shout What I Cannot Speak*, written in response to the seven words banned by Trump from use at the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (I had to look up the details of the

story) in which, rather slyly, Laura uses all seven words in a powerful piece on experiencing a miscarriage.

The Rugby Ball is a playful poem written from the point of view of the actual rugby ball;

“I’ve seen you get kicked and bruised.
I’ve even watched you bleed.
Scuffed, dirty yet treated like a jewel;
I’m the only thing you want.”

I love the way Laura plays with the lines and the words on the page to bring even more vitality and action into the piece.

When I read *The Library*, I felt the urge to send it to all our idiot local governments here in the UK who are closing local libraries at a terrifying rate. What a wonderful celebration of what libraries are, what they were always intended to be! “Unto each parishioner, a gift: / access to netherworlds, other worlds, their own universe. /.../ Years of Blessings at their fingertips.” This encapsulates much of what I love about poetry; powerful moments given life and elevated to a higher plane by a few well-chosen words. Another good example is the very next poem in this collection, *The Phone Call*, where the writer calls up busting for a fight...

“I was coming in
Major League fastball
Meteor that killed the dinosaurs
Muhammad Ali’s jabs
hot.”

...but finds her ire earthed by an almost non-reaction from the person on the other end of the line. She’s not sated by the end of the call, but the heat has gone inwards, burning up from the inside, not only now from the original anger, but also from (his?) inability or unwillingness to give that anger space to blow itself out. We’ve all been there.

The very last poem, *My Little Gladiator*, speaks in lovingly glowing tones and details of (presumably) Laura’s little girl, running between gardening adventures outside in the sun and mummy in the kitchen, always ready with sun cream, sun hat, cuddles and words of encouragement. There’s a real sense of nurture throughout this piece, and it brings the collection to a satisfying conclusion that has led the reader through a journey of pre- and post-marriage concerns, post-marriage disasters, and finally to a curious, active little off-spring to make sure those minutes no longer pass “slower than sloths”.

There are a few poems here that didn’t quite chime for me – *Sisters* and *The Morning Walk* felt thinner than the rest, somehow. In my experience, some poems arrive fully formed and hardly need any further work, while others arrive in partial form, or unfinished, or in need of filling out, expanding somehow (physically, emotionally, sensorially, metaphorically...). The skill is in discerning which ones are which, and it feels to me like these two poems, plus maybe *Springtime Flowers*, arrived needing work and were mistaken for being fully formed.

Circling back to the beginning, subsequent readings of those opening two poems bring rich rewards, especially if one lets go of the need to know and just allows the language and imagery flow over, across and through. *Ruined Books* ends, "I was born to destroy everything you ever loved before me." That line carries so much visceral charge it's a mystery how it passed me by on the first reading.

Overall, this is a wonderful collection to read and get to know, and it's been an honour to be asked to review it. I'll happily read more from Laura DiNovis Berry and I look forward to seeing how her art develops and grows from this accomplished chapbook.

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