



SHAMANIC POET

Lines by Leon: A Review

Lines by Leon is a very eclectic first collection of 'poems, prose and pictures' by Leon Stevens, who has structured the book by collecting the poems – which form the bulk of the tome – under various themed headings such as *As I See It*, *Environment*, *Ponderance and Muse* and so on. This is a helpful tool by which to navigate, though most of his poems tend to leave the reader in little doubt as to their subject matter.

There are poems here that I love and, to be honest, there are some that just fall flat on their face. Stevens admits in the introduction that he initially wrote them for himself and then, in a line I highlighted the moment I read it, says, "I decided that what I created needed to be released into the world, that they couldn't just stay in my head, or in my possession." I love it when a poet or an artist reaches this conclusion – that it's selfish, in a way, to hoard all your creativity and hide it from everyone else! Take the risk of being vulnerable and open in the world through your poetry, through your stories and your art, and embrace all that comes as a result. However, an element of discernment is still called for; not everything we write is necessarily worth sharing.

Of the early poems under *As I See It*, two short ones – *Silence* and *Question* – are both blisteringly honest and pack a surprisingly insightful punch in only a handful of lines. Even this early in the collection, though, I found myself increasingly distracted by the eccentric (and, at times, non-existent) rhyming schemes. As an editor, I'm a notorious pedant! While I love blank verse as much as I love the numerous poetic forms that can bring beauty through discipline, I have the sense that Stevens either doesn't consider such things, or else has a take-it-as-it-comes attitude in this regard. As a result, we get *We All Know of One*, a poem in two parts (or two poems on the subject of a quiet, favourite eatery). The first eight lines of the first part are blank verse and then, with no line break and no warning, it launches into AABABACDED. There may be a poetic form that calls for this pattern, but a) I doubt it, and b) with eight lines in blank verse and ten lines sort-of rhyming, one gets the sense that the poem is neither one thing nor another. *We All Know of One (Part II)* runs with AABCDDEFGGG.

The relatively random punctuation throughout is also somewhat distracting. I get that not all poems (or poets) want punctuation and leave it out in a meaningful and consistent way. Take a look at the work of Rupi Kaur; in her 2015 collection *milk and honey* she capitalises nothing, including her own name, and only uses periods in prose

poems. Others use it in full. Stevens, however, vacillates. If this is to create a specific effect, it doesn't work; more likely, punctuation and capitalisation don't get the attention they deserve, leaving some of the poems feeling a bit slapdash.

This also comes across in the occasional mistake in the text. In the first line of *On Sports*, I'm pretty sure Stevens means he was an ardent sports fan; 'adamant' makes a lot less sense. And the title of *Hate* is written in symbols, as a swear word, which would work a lot better if he stuck to the convention of having the same number of symbols as there are letters in the original word. The untitled poem on page 60 should (I think) either read *To excess*, or *Too excessive*, but not *To excessive*.

Some lines are in desperate need of poetic attention, lines such as "A battle of earth and sky / Who will win and who will die?" from *Cycle*, or "When people say it or act on it", the last line from the afore-mentioned *Hate*. Some poems simply don't deserve to be in this collection, like the juvenile *Minneapolis*, the unconvincing *My Take*, and *How Many's a Crowd*. which comes across as a lame attempt at doing a Spike Milligan.

On the other hand, there are strong, moving poems scattered throughout, and they're a joy to stumble across. I found *Life (What Really Matters)* uplifting, and I loved *Vivas Las Nature* (though I'm not convinced of the title, either poetically or linguistically). *If (The Refugee)* is a heart-rending lament on loss and belonging, and the first of the Ego poems is whimsical and sweet, reminding me of the Australian poet, Michael Leunig. I found *Then and Now* thought-provoking.

There's a snapshot of this mix of the beautiful and banal in the three *Shadow* poems, where the first and the last are sublime, yet the middle one sags terribly between them and lets them all down.

The discipline of a rhyming scheme, or a specific poetic form, would truly transform some of these works. *Winnipeg* is a good example, while *Not Always a Bad Thing* has a strong, sensory theme running throughout and would be so much better were it crafted into a haiku.

The strongest section by far comes late in the collection and is simply called *Odds and Ends*. *The Sock* is the only poem here that follows a standard, easy rhyming format and, though not brilliant, is a real breath of fresh air. The drawings, for the most part, add colour (though not literally) and life to a scattering of pages, though it's on page 57 where the sketch and the untitled poem work in truly beautiful harmony. *Time and Time Again* has a very Zen energy about it;

*Time passes
Only when you impose a starting point
Removing that restriction
Allows for things to just...
Happen*

Though even here, the second line is crying out for a full stop (period) that would allow line three to emerge into its full voice and power.

The *Table Scraps* mini section contains some nice ideas that have the potential to be developed further over time; I've never thought of the horns of vehicles having moods before!

The *Short, Short Stories* section is a real delight. I'll leave them as a pleasant surprise; suffice to say I wrote a word against each of the three which were, in order, "gorgeous", "evocative" and "lovely". In fact, "lovely" as a comment on the final piece in this collection is doing it a disservice – it's whimsical and evocative, with an edge of magic realism about it.

There are two places where the drawings take centre stage; one of them works amazingly well (*Stick Story Romance*), while the other (*This Becomes That*) takes an interesting idea and plays with it in several imaginative ways, but it still feels under-developed, with more punch potential that's not yet been uncovered.

Overall, Stevens has put together a very mixed bag which, taken as a whole, is an emotional rollercoaster of sublime highs mixed with patches of deep disappointment. In future collections, I'd like to see more thought going into the crafting and fine-tuning of each piece, each line, each syllable, in order to properly honour and do justice to what is clearly a prolifically creative mind. This may be challenging as a final thought, but the strength Stevens reveals in his three short, short stories may be a hint to him that prose is perhaps his stronger suite.

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