

TLC Showcase

JULIA WEBB

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Introduction to the collection

Many of the poems in the collection explore the theme of family and sisterhood in some way. I am interested in the everyday stuff of real life, how people relate to each other especially within families, the stories and myths that families generate about themselves and the mental games that people play. This interest is reflected in the content and themes of the collection. I am fascinated by how family members (especially siblings) can be casually cruel to each other. There are several sequences in the book that feature different kinds of dysfunctional family – there is a sequence of prose poems written in the voice of a young girl who is from a family dominated by a fanatically religious father, and the book finishes with a sequence of poems about the relationship between two sisters; the elder of whom is obsessed with the circus and involves the younger one in her tricks – not always kindly. Quite a few of the poems have a surreal twist too – I am really fascinated by the idea of transformations – so people sometimes become animals or birds and a woman wears a dress of live bees.

There are other types of poems threaded in amongst the family poems too - poems about nature, loss, love etc. that are informed by the very particular landscape and atmosphere of rural Norfolk. That all sounds very heavy but there are a few celebratory poems in the book, and there is a bit of dark humour too – especially in the sequence of prose poems about the religious family.

This book has been in the making a long time – I began writing seriously in 2006, but the TLC Free Read from Sibyl Ruth in early 2013 marked a real turning point for me. At the time of my Free Read I was working on trying to put my collection into order and it was clear that specific themes and ideas were emerging. What is interesting to me now looking back on Sibyl's report is not only how she picked up on these themes and interests from the small selection I sent her, but also that several of the poems that I sent did not actually make it into the final draft of the book. Those that I lost along the way were ones that Sibyl had also felt weren't quite working for one reason or another. She was, however, really positive and encouraging about my writing and her comments definitely boosted my confidence in my ability as a poet. I went on to have some Arts Council funded mentorship with Pascale Petit and with her firm critique I lost even more poems from the collection and wrote some

better ones. The result being that I feel like the collection works well as a cohesive whole with particular themes running through it and proper interactions between the poems, rather than being a "greatest hits" style anthology of poems written over several years.

Poems from Bird Sisters, by Julia Webb

The Piano Lesson

When I asked Daddy if I could learn the piano, he said *NO* because *MUSIC IS THE DEVIL'S WORK*. When Daddy was away doing *GOD'S WORK* Mama took us to visit the end-of-the-row neighbours. They are secret friends because they are *BAPTISTS*. They have our house back-to-front and a real live piano which sometimes I am allowed to play. Steve taught me *COCKLES AND MUSSELS ALIVE ALIVE-O* and in bed that night I sang the song to Alice. I was just getting to the good bit about the *GHOST* when Daddy banged in shouting *STOP THAT NOISE, DON'T YOU KNOW THAT DUBLIN IS FULL OF HEATHENS AND PAPISTS?* I didn't know what a papist was, but I asked Daddy is *Molly Malone a Papist?* which made Alice snort with laughter. Daddy didn't answer; he just slammed out again muttering about Papists and the devil. I hummed Cockles and Mussels under my breath until I fell asleep, and that night I dreamt that I was Molly Malone and my barrow looked a lot like a piano but with limpets stuck all over it like the rocks on the beach at the Sunday School outing.

My owl sister mistakes me for a mouse

I let myself go slack in her claws.

Her wings soft the air,

hang us in deep blue brushed with stars,

the village spreads below like a painting.

I try to speak her name

but all I manage is a squeak.

She dives low over the farm,

drops me through a chimney hole

in amongst her needle-beaked children.

She doesn't pause or look back.

Thetford Forest

Frozen mud-pelt of early morning,
the air bristles with frost-shine.

Our winter breath hangs
in the air before us.

We walk into deep grey
where the trees crowd in,

their pine needle smell
overwhelming.

There is faraway bird-call,
the startled flap of a fresh waked pigeon,

A deer eye appears,
and vanishes back into shadow.

We emerge into the stark-limbed skeleton
of the deciduous forest.

The sky opens out – a gap of relief
after the inky conifers.

We gulp lung after lung of early winter,
see every third tree marked with a cross:

a yellow smear
where the saw will bite,

flaking jackets of bark barely
covering pale bodies.

About the Writer

Julia Webb was born in London and grew up in Thetford – a small town in Norfolk. She left school at sixteen and spent nine years living in a rural commune before settling in Norwich. She spent 10 years working in a pre-school before deciding to follow her dream and go to university. She has a BA (hons) in Creative Writing from Norwich University of the Arts and an MA in Creative Writing (Poetry) from The University of East Anglia.

Her work has been widely published in print and online journals and anthologies, including: *The Rialto*; *Poetry Salzburg Review*; *Ink, Sweat and Tears*; *Magma*; *Interpreter's House*; *Obsessed With Pipework*; *Under the Radar* and *The Bohemyth*. In 2011 she won the poetry Society's Stanza competition with her prose poem *Lent* and in 2014 she was shortlisted for the Poetry School/Pighog pamphlet prize.

Julia teaches creative writing in the community, runs poetry workshops in schools for the SAW Trust and is a poetry editor for Lighthouse Literary Journal. In her spare time she runs Norwich Stanza, The Norwich Poetry Book Group and is on the committee of Café Writers. Julia believes in the power of literature and creative writing to change lives. She recently began working for Biblio: books for life. She lives in Norwich with her 23-year-old son who is an artist and writer.

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