

In Casting Off

J O Morgan

Happen*Stance* Press

Review by Richie McCaffery

My appetite for the verse-novel (or novella) form has really been whetted in 2015. First there was Jim Carruth's *Killochries* (Freight), a narrative about two contrasting men both working on a remote farm over a period of time. Morgan's latest work also deals with a period of time passing and a primary industry in a remote, imaginary but entirely believable setting - a small fishing town. Like Carruth's book, there is a clash of personalities, a love intrigue created by the arrival of a 'foreign girl' into this small fishing community. Certain details and narrative strands of this book can be determined, but it is overall shrouded in mystery. The place itself is both familiar and other at the same time – for instance there are white bears that roam the woods around the town and the time period is hard to identify, for there are modern details but the men are dressed in 'waistcoat / and rolled-up-cuff tweeds'.

Men are lost at sea, and the verse novel shows how generations have been affected by this loss. The book itself ends with the suggestion that a lost, presumed drowned brother has returned, but this could equally be the return of the 'foreign girl' who vowed to come back. Morgan's unadorned and pithy writing style, twinned with the story of a lost young man, reminds me particularly of David Guterson's *The Drowned Son* where we see how families are torn apart by the loss of men at sea, but unlike Guterson's novella, there is no attempt at a reconciliation here, everything is left hovering in the balance. While Morgan can be very direct and terse, as I have already mentioned, there are moments of startling vision and imagery here, such as the loss of the brother at sea:

A conjuring trick of the sea:
such a volume of water brought down
it engulfed him completely,
then to reveal its empty hand
in spreading itself out thin;
a lacy slick of ocean-gloss
retreating from the deck.

One of the strengths of this book is how Morgan can make the mundane seem magical, such as the ‘foreign girl’s’ reaction to her new room: ‘her room [...] smells sweetly of wood, / as though its small space had been newly scooped out / just for her’. While family tensions are explored at length, another thing this book does very well is contrast and parallel repeatedly the wilderness with civilisation as represented by the fishing town, as well as exploring the liminal space between the two. Sealskin is a recurring motif and the title of the book suggests nautical casting off as well as a casting off of human inhibitions, and sealskin has a folkloric value symbolising shape-shifting. While family life and human relationships are radically altered in the course of this book, its main strength is the proximity of the wild to the human and how they merge. For instance, the foreign girl spends her time sunbathing and having fun and ‘she does not share the worry of the wife’ and this is followed immediately by an image of their lifeblood, the fish:

Fish need to be worked to a frenzy if they
are to tie themselves in knots to clog the nets.
Warm lazy fish slip easy through the holes,
the same way a blob of mercury narrows its waist
to squeeze through the tightest of gaps.

In Casting Off seems to invite us to take an imaginative, but entirely believable, voyage as readers, from its striking imagery to the handsome hardback format of the book, it is an experience that takes us out of the comfortable confines of ‘one-page’ poetry.

Richie McCaffery’s first full length collection of poems, *Cairn*, was published in 2014.