

## **Double Exposure: A Memoir**

by Brian Johnstone

Saraband

Reviewed by Jennifer Morag Henderson

*Double Exposure* is a memoir that focuses on two family secrets, revealed twenty years apart. After the sheltered upbringing of a private schoolboy in 1950s Edinburgh, Brian Johnstone's sense of self was challenged when he discovered that not only his father but also his mother had previous 'lives' before marriage, and that both of them had daughters: he has two half-sisters that he only finds out about in adulthood. Johnstone goes back into his own memories, as well as speaking to other relatives and researching in archives to find out more about his parents' youth. *Double Exposure* captures the slow and lasting damage that family secrets can cause. The revelations themselves are not the point of this book, and instead it is about coming to terms – or not – with the things that are revealed. This is not a linear, easy process, and it is depicted extremely well.

Johnstone is a poet, with several collections to his credit, and has been involved in organising poetry events for many years: current project *Scotia Extremis* has been featured online over the last year. His memoir reflects this literary background, and several of his previously published poems are featured in the narrative, the context adding to the meaning of the poems, while the poems enhance the memoir itself. He also makes reference to many other books and essays about memory, family, and about understanding the impetus to write memoir, which he looked at in his own quest to understand his mother and father.

Thinking of himself as coming from 'the very model of a 50s nuclear family' which was 'perfect – in the perfect world that was settled, post-war, suburban, middle-class Scotland', Johnstone struggles with the realisation that things were not as they had seemed. He hopes for psychological understanding of his parents' choices, but has difficulty, in particular, with accepting his mother's choices. He quotes sociological studies which he has read in his attempt to understand her belief in the stigma attached to having an illegitimate child, but cannot reconcile this completely with his own attitudes, formed in the social upheaval of the 60s and 70s. This is one of the sadnesses of this book: that it is a coming-to-terms with things that cannot be altered, which are fixed in the past.

Johnstone says that he has changed some names, but it seems that at least one of the people intimately involved in this story may be unaware that this memoir has been published.

There is a feeling that it is a story that is still, and may always be, incomplete, and that the exposure of these secrets has not been a cleansing experience. The heartfelt conclusion, however, is both a justification for the book and an affirmation of love's strength: 'All I want to be able to do,' Brian Johnstone says, 'is to tell both my parents how much I loved them – and how I would have loved them no less had I known what I know now.'