

## **My Katherine Mansfield Project**

by Kirsty Gunn

Nottinghill Editions

Reviewed by Cynthia Rogerson

If you have an allergy to gushing, close your eyes now. I can think of nothing but praise for this original and exciting work. First of all, the book itself is an exquisite object. A small hard back with a grey canvas cover, there is no picture - merely some text in red and white. MY KATHERINE MANSFIELD PROJECT. Under this title: 'One has left a version of oneself at the PLACE OF DEPARTURE and it waits for us at the POINT OF RETURN - but she is not me when I get there.'

So, already, before you have even opened up the book, you are drawn into this other world with prose alone. Gunn has a distinctive style, always recognizable. She fully admits her obsession with (and therefore influence by) Mansfield - but her style is not mimicry. Gunn is herself, entirely - honest, questioning, humble, with an incisive intelligence that streaks through her sometimes meandering prose. There is composure and coherence, but there is also a compelling naturalness. And a sense that Gunn (like Mansfield) is very interested in exploring new ways to tell stories.

Also like Mansfield, Gunn is from Wellington, New Zealand, and has spent her adult life in the UK (London, Dundee and Caithness). In 2009 she was awarded a Randell Fellowship, and the opportunity to live for a season in Randell Cottage in Thorndon, very near the childhood home of Mansfield. Gunn was already an established Mansfield authority, and intended to spend this period immersing herself further in Mansfield's world - and to respond to it with her own writing. And of course, there was the chance to experience a homecoming that Mansfield yearned for but never attained.

Rather like Mansfield's story 'Dollhouse', then, this tiny book contains realities inside realities. It is the memoir of an writer ex-pat returning to her home and recording her various ideas, feelings and epiphanies about this. It is a smattering of information about Mansfield's childhood and adolescence, told through extracts of her stories and biographical details. It is a small collection of Gunn's own stories inspired by Mansfield's stories - snippets and sketches which will not lie still on the page, and thrill the senses each time. And finally, and perhaps most vitally, with all these snippets and memories and stories taken together - it is a work concerned with the meaning of home. Not just for exiles, but for everyone. In addition

to Mansfield, Gunn draws on writers such as James Woods and Said and VS Pritchett. What the concept of home means to us, and what happens to us when we move away from it. Because of course, we all move from home - even if we die in the house we were born in.

Yes, one of the reasons I am gushing is because of the obvious parallels with my own life - I am American, and increasingly find myself fascinated with the home I casually left behind. It has a strange power, and I read Gunn's book looking for light to shed on my own mysteries. I found light aplenty, and more. If Gunn had not already won Scottish Book of the Year in 2007 with *The Boy and the Sea*, I would bet on this book winning that same award in 2017. For Gunn is a master, and this book - this discourse of dislocation - is a masterpiece.