

Step by Slow Step

By Rhoda Michael, illustrations by Julie Wyness

Leopard Press

Reviewed by Anne MacLeod

There is a worldwide Medical Humanities movement which celebrates the work produced by those active in medical care in all its diverse inter-disciplinarity; which assesses the medical interaction and its implications for empathy, ethics and understanding across the raft of social sciences; and which encourages practitioners to reflect on medicine and life with creative and scientific rigour. There have, of course, been many celebrated medical writers. William Carlos Williams and Keats are among the more pre-eminent but more recent Scottish examples of writers from the caring professions would include Suhayl Saadi, John Glenday and Gavin Francis. Rhoda Michael, retired educational psychologist, may be seen as a worthy addition to this spectrum.

The British Psychological Society advertised a poetry competition in 2015, printing a poem 'Language' by one of its judges, David Sutton. The first stanza declares 'Its maps, they say, are in our minds already:/ How else could we adventure in that country/So sure of paths we never walked upon?'

In *Step by Slow Step* Michael maps a world multi-voiced and variegated. Its imagined inhabitants are generally unsure of direction and – most tellingly – of their own strength. She paints this world incrementally, through the stories her protagonists offer in individual and often muscular free verse. Though many of the poems are written in first person, and though the underlying question is often, as George Gunn comments on the flyleaf, one of love, it is not only in the eight-poem series 'Songs of Ishmael' that love will trip, confound or scar. Michael examines love and life in all its guises. At times playful, as in 'Something Leather', ('Her message said she would be/wearing something leather'), or tender, as in 'Little Girl' ('Little tumbling girl, tumbled into sleep/before you could wash her') she does not shrink from the difficulties of human existence. In 'Piano', 'His feet shuffle. His lungs seize in the frozen air./ He's foraged nothing. Nothing that will burn.'; in 'Girl Inside', 'Listen to her, grinding her teeth and moaning,/like the wind in an empty drain.' And for Ishmael, at the centre of the biblical poem sequence that brings this volume to a close, there is nothing but heartbreak. 'Abraham's voice rejoices./ Behold him whose name is Isaac,/who shall be my first-born son.'

A natural editor – she was for many years the much-loved Poetry editor of *Northwords*, and first editor of its new phase *Northwords Now* – Rhoda Michael is clearly beguiled by the sound and sensuality of language. In ‘Snap’ she celebrates ‘Snap of ice from the tray./ Snap again in the glass./ Ice-sharp sliver of sound,’. Stop for a moment. Read that aloud. Luxuriate in the feel of each word, as Michael clearly does.

These poems are not an easy or superficial read. The precision of the language; the strength of each narrative; the crowding, distinctive voices demand time for assimilation, for thought. This handsome collection, effectively illustrated by Julie Wyness and edited by Janet Macinnes, will amply repay such effort.

