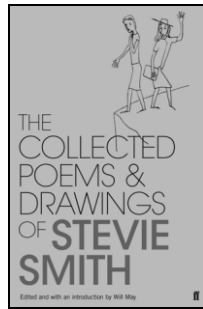


## ‘STEVIE SMITH INVITES CONTRADICTIONS’



*“[Stevie Smith] said ... ‘The human creature is alone in his carapace. Poetry is a strong way out.’ It became her life.”*

photo courtesy of Faber & Faber: Evening Standard/Getty Images

*The Collected Poems & Drawings of Stevie Smith*, (edited and with an Introduction by Will May), Faber & Faber, 2015. Hardcover, £35 ISBN 978-0-5713113-0 9 (pp 848)

In September 2002, when Joanna Cameron and I were co-organising the ten-day Poetry Festival for the Centenary of the Palmers Green poet Stevie Smith, we were amazed to find that the *Collected Poems* of this ‘national treasure’ were out of print. Now with this magnificently-presented 848-page anthology of Smith’s poems and drawings from her thirty-five-year career, Faber & Faber and editor Will May have redressed the situation.

As a poet, Stevie Smith is tricky and adventurous. Here we have an array of poems with an anarchical wide sweep, ranging from explorations of Greek myths, nonsense poems, legends, Biblical references and Grimm’s Fairy Tales to acerbic social commentary. Will May’s editorial introduces Smith’s work with ‘Like all great poets, Stevie Smith invites contradictions’ – indeed a situation which has often divided the critics, partly because of her faux-naïf style, shifting voices, multi-registers and diverse sources. This collection is a wholly new edition of her work and Will May has collected together the illustrations and poems from her original published volumes for the first time, recording interesting details about them, and describing the various versions Smith presented both on stage and page. The breadth of this book shows why she was so loved. At the time of her death in 1971, she was one of the 20th century’s most popular poets, with Sylvia Plath and Seamus Heaney among her admirers.

If you mention Palmers Green, people will often say, ‘Stevie Smith’ or ‘Not waving but drowning’, quote a few lines of that well-known wonderful poem and leave it there. However, as has been demonstrated in this mammoth book, there is incredibly more to Stevie Smith than that. She is strikingly contemporary. One of the book’s delights is the number of Smith’s illustrations that accompany the poems. The critics are divided on the value of these but I feel they often reinforce the message of the poems. Take the brief piece, *All Things Pass*. “All things pass. / Love and mankind is grass.” The accompanying illustration shows a suburban couple in each other’s arms – the point of love’s transience being made with cutting irony, although with a certain truth. In her themes of death, waste, ecology, loneliness, injustice, inequality, her eye missed nothing – all very sad but she often rescued the problem of the poem’s gloom with devastating wit.

Stevie Smith, born Florence Margaret Smith in 1902, was later nicknamed ‘Stevie’ because her fringe resembled that of the jockey Steve Donahue. When asked for biographical details, she summed up her life: ‘Born in Hull. But moved to London at age of three and has lived in the same house ever since’. That house at 1 Avondale Road, N13 was Smith’s home until her premature death from a brain tumour in 1971. She celebrated it, “a house of female habitation” in her poem *A House of Mercy* and it is now a place of pilgrimage for Smith admirers world-wide. She was sometimes critical of Palmers Green, ‘dear suburb of my infancy’ as she called it, but she loved it too, its green spaces, especially Grovelands Park and often mentioned it in her work – eight books of poetry, three novels. Will May outlines the steady development of her oeuvre despite its difficulties, and his editorial explanations, to some extent mirroring her life, aid our enjoyment of the poems. He points to how ‘Smith understood that a modern poet needed a persona, even if it was one that advertised its own marginality at every

opportunity'. Though she may not have admitted it, she was quite feminist in her views and in poem after poem, decried women's second-class status. Seamus Heaney praised her for her 'Variety and inventiveness, much humour and understanding, and a constant poignancy'. An excellent example of this is the poem *Autumn*:

He told his life story to Mrs. Courtly  
Who was a widow, 'Let us get married shortly.'  
He said, 'I am no longer passionate,  
But we can have some conversation before it is too late.'

Smith was always ambitious for her poems and to be told by the Chatto editor on presentation of her first MSS, to 'go away and write a novel', well, it wasn't what she'd hoped for or expected. But not to be outdone, she soon produced what became her first book, *Novel on Yellow Paper* – a semi-autobiographical collection of prose-poetry, 'the talking voice that runs on' as she termed it. Lack of space prevents me from quoting Smith at length, but she is invariably surprising, entertaining and intellectually rewarding.

At the same time, her refusal to leave her North London suburb seemed to many to enhance her eccentricity. Palmers Green was the home of her beloved Lion Aunt and where she found much inspiration and the quiet needed for her creativity. She said of poetry: 'The human creature is alone in his carapace. Poetry is a strong way out'. It became her life.

### **Katherine Gallagher**