

**SONNETS OF CONFLICTED FEELINGS:
MYRA SCHNEIDER REVIEWS HANNAH LOWE'S, *THE KIDS***



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What immediately struck me about Hannah Lowe's new collection, *The Kids*, is the total openness of her writing and the skilful way she employs the sonnet, both the traditional sonnet and variations of it, to investigate contemporary urban life, teaching, her own life and changes in it. She uses the form with wit, insight and feeling, all in a conversational tone. This is a considerable achievement.

The first section of the book is primarily about the years Lowe spent teaching sixth formers, who were mostly immigrants, in an inner-city London school. Early on three poems relate how she got to grips with teaching. In the first of these, *The Art of Teaching I*, she describes her initial shortcomings: "I sat behind my desk and talked and talked / like a manic newsreader, while their faces balked / in boredom or horror..." In *The Art of Teaching III* she shows how she mastered the art:

How to shake a kid from boredom? Squeeze
their names out like a flannel. Swap their chairs,
and split the windows for a freezing breeze
or zap them with a burning-teacher stare...

Later, we see Lowe coping with difficult pupils. Two sonnets, which take me back to teaching in a similar sort of London school in the 1960s, are devoted to Janine who "was a Monday-morning-queasy-feeling. / I was never ready for her choice of sting: / the late strut-in, teeth-kissing, rolling eyes..." Once the girl discovers that Lowe's father is "half Jamaican, half Chinese," which she feels is a connection with her teacher, she seems to forgive her.

The writing is witty and sometimes humorous. *The Sixth-Form Theatre Trip* has a wonderful sustained image of the pupils as dogs. It offers more than fun though. In the sestet it's clear Lowe is a caring teacher as she describes the pupils' reactions when the curtains lift:

... your dogs are hypnotised –
their ears like little hoisted sails, the wag
of tails, their shining dog-hearts fling wide open.
They know these words, these lines, memorised
like buried bones. And don't you love your dogs?

Some poems raise difficult and painful subject matter. She describes taking the class to see the film *Notes on a Scandal* which explores the relationship between a female teacher and a fifteen-year-old boy, and in *Boy* she writes about a boy who would "catch my eye across the crowded canteen / and hold me there." At the end of the section there are two poems about the 7/7 bombings which took place while Lowe was teaching at the school. The first, *7/7*, is a graphic picturing of the death of a friend of hers in a tube train. The writing has a political slant in the second poem, *Ricochet*, which begins "Four boys blew up a tube train and a bus." The sestet describes the return to school after the

summer holidays and states without comment the chilling information: “Moniza said a police van took her brother. / The papers called the bombers *British born*.”

The first part of the second section of the book relates to Lowe’s difficult teenage years. Although she reveals her inner feelings Lowe is not a confessional poet. She is always as interested in other people as she is in herself so in *The Only Black Girl*, for example, the focus is on Natalie who was black and when teased stood up to the other kids. The fact that, like Natalie, she also grew up on the wrong side of the tracks and was sometimes teased as a “white wog,” is only briefly mentioned.

There are poems which illustrate difficult relationships Lowe had with teachers and others about her first sexual experiences. She also writes about her complex relationship with her mother who taught at her junior school and how music brought the two of them close together: “If asked, she’d put down her cigarettes... and from her hands, tight-knitted hands, the notes / fell out, like gloves unravelling their wool”, *Bethena*. Lowe’s love of music is also expressed in a poem dedicated to her two music teachers. When she practised more, as Miss Forbes urged her to, “my hands would sing across / the keys. With her I learnt what learning was for.”

The later poems in this section focus on a time beyond Lowe’s schooldays. *Stroke*, set out as one poem, is a series of five sonnets about a stroke her mother suffered after thirty-seven years of teaching young children. Lowe truthfully records her reluctance at first to go home when her father telephoned her. The poem ends: “At home she wore a too-small yellow jumper, / laid foetal on the sofa to the telly’s / constant upbeat chatter... I was teacher now, and mother.”

Much of Lowe’s previous writing, both poetry and prose, has a focus on her father, who also has a presence in *The Kids*. The sonnet, *The White Dog*, a prologue to the book, ends: “He was dead, he was dead. Now what should I do?” In the *Sonnet for Noah* she underlines his importance to her, writing about his death: “each man after / was a patch I stitched onto my heart.” In *The River* she’s more explicit: “Not another poem about my father, / as though he’s been running forever through me, / rising, churning like the Yallahs River / where he was born,” and there’s a sense of anguish as she imagines seeing him at the door: “There’s something he wants to say. / And nothing’s been forgiven.”

The final part of the book includes poems about Lowe’s child, Rory at different ages. In *Skirting* he’s pictured “in his battered pram / like a prophet, his milky arms spread open...” *The Sky Is Snowing*, which depicts mother and child watching the snow is both delightful and lyrical: “The sky is snowing, love, in pale marshmallows / and flecks of mint.”

In *Anjali Mudra* Lowe writes about the amicable split up with her partner. She begins by expressing her gratitude: “Thank you, Richard for everything you’ve taught me – / the hand-stitched book, the heft of vellum paper, / the folded poem, the engraved poem, the poetry / of Edwin Morgan. Delicacy, desire, / language.”

The octave of the final poem, *Kathy, Carla*, is a description of a yoga class and in the sestet Lowe writes about running a poetry class. She modestly concludes: “But I’m not a master, just a pair of palms / which pull or loosen someone else’s lines – / I still need kind and guiding hands on mine.”

The use of the sonnet form in *The Kids* to write about and contain conflicting feelings is masterly and Hannah Lowe’s exploration of her years of teaching, her own life and the changes in it reflect contemporary life and its problems. Witty, generous, honest, thought-provoking and accessible, she has a unique voice which is both welcome and relevant.

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