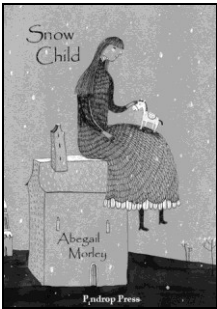


REVIEW: CAROLINE CARVER ON ABEGAIL MORLEY

Snow Child, Abegail Morley, Pindrop Press, 2011. £8.99 ISBN 978-0-9567822-4-3



“She lays poems on the page with the kind of gentleness that the best poems find”

It is a real pleasure to review Abegail Morley’s recent collection, starting with the delightful cover by Jenny Meilihove. The cover – not the conventional place to begin a book review – can be a powerful, make-or-break part of any book, especially poetry. In the case of *Snow Child*, the image reflects the delicacy of the writing, with its gentle and attractive style, gradually revealing that something is not quite – in fact, not at all – right in the world this poet inhabits through her writing.

Like her first prize-winning collection *How to Pour Madness into a Teacup*, the work is beautiful but unsettling. It is no coincidence that the very first poem is called *Unstable* and that a surreal element immediately appears: “Quite unexpectedly this morning / I splashed my inner light / on the hallway floor ...” Although most of the poems are sombre, there is wry observation as well. The small irritations of sharing a home with someone are illustrated, not by major problems, but by last-straw incidental happenings, illustrating that nothing in the relationship works any more. In *Moved in* a lover is described: “He’s the type of bloke who hisses through his teeth, / whistles in the loo when it’s dark. / His alarm clock / makes a rowdy din at 6am.”

Clearly this man is on his way out, but, be warned, there is further explicit pain to come. *Mud*, “I wait for you, one hand over my mouth” (a strong image) and *Family album*, are almost too painful to read, “On the scan you are tiny – a whiteness / in a dark sky ... You stitched yourself to me with fisherman’s nylon, / sharp needles where your nails should have been. / But even in my warm belly you were unformed” When I first heard this poem read aloud, I involuntarily blurted out that it was ‘terrible’. The subject and the way it was expressed were almost too much to bear.

How to deal with pain, one’s own, or someone else’s, is always a perennial question, although many poets, especially women, manage it in an impressive way. I put Morley in this category. She lays poems of pain on the page with the kind of gentleness that the best poems find, allowing them to make their own roads into the reader’s mind.

Her work is particularly compelling when the poems dip into the surreal. In *Breaking up*, someone “steals the sense from her sentence”, “Last week in Starbucks / he snatched away the letter L ... when he starts on the vowels, / she’ll disappear completely”. I love the way the fantasy world mixes with the reality of Starbucks. A few pages on, we are having coffee in Costa, but still nothing is straightforward ... “We drink here because of the rain forests, / We’re saving them.”

In *Body* Morley is more relentless, “I am certain someone said / the dead grow larger at night...”. Further on, in the poem *Hospital ward*, we are with her, drawn deeply into pain ... “I brandish my scars at the moon; they are no deeper than its seas, / not struck thick like impact craters, not a patchwork of black and white ...”. “If we die, just for a little while,” the poet says in *Against the rain*, “we see ourselves running onwards, / we can close our already closed eyes / and watch the white in the light of our lids”; and, at the end of this poem, “We need to die for a moment / and watch our present greet us, / like a stranger in the street / mistaking us for someone else.”

In *Snow Child*, although nothing is fulfilled, love promises a kind of happiness. *Make me love you* includes: “You taught me how to pinch the sky / and let a gap breathe through the crack, / slowly pulling apart our thumbs and fingers / to capture a person at great distance.” Perhaps such distance will have lessened in her next collection.

Caroline Carver