

***The Tin-Kin* by Eleanor Thom**

Reviews and Quotes

The Guardian, Saturday 13 June 2009

On The Home Front

A powerful first novel about the history and the landscape of the north-east coast of Scotland, the Moray coast, came out earlier this year - *The Tin-Kin* by Eleanor Thom (Duckworth). It catches something about the locality I've not read in any other writer since Jessie Kesson; it conjours landscape by strength of voice, and its take on history is as bracing and cleansing as the local weather.

ALI SMITH

Scottish Review of Books, Volume 5 Number 2, May 2009

The Tin-Kin

Eleanor Thom possesses a poetic, heavily metaphorical style which interweaves skillfully with a detailed account of the traveller community of the 1950s. Mixing pathos with lyrical joy in the small things, she employs an acutely sensitive reading of time and place. She sometimes veers into the cloying, and occasionally the meaning doesn't bear the weight of her imagery, but this is a highly accomplished first novel that is structurally perfect. Her ability to withhold and offer essential details of plot is note perfect and her cinematic eye for the dramatic moment neatly dovetails with her original use of imagery to propel the narrative's momentum.

The novel starts with the voice of Dawn, a single mother on the run from a violent husband returning to Elgin and her family home. She discovers an old album of photographs in her late aunt's house of a traveller community. The novel revisits history through the photographs, gradually revealing the story behind the violent murder of the traveller Jock at the hands of the local police half a century ago.

The power of the novel lies in Thom's ability to convey the travellers' world. We are quickly introduced to the Batchie Woman, a fisherman's daughter, who can read fortunes, make curses, and foretells Jock's early death. Through the voice of Jock we are told how finding jobs is becoming difficult for the community. As well as collecting scrap metals, "we do odd jobs too, general labour and farm work when we can get it. There used tae be forestry, sometimes fishing or ship building. But we're nae able to get those jobs now, stuck in the Lane".

Jock also tells us about the experience of living in the perpetual noise of such close-knit families. "We're used tae hearing everything. Ma haughs her chest out, the bairns play and squabble and greet. The men's boots stamp up and down the dancers. We're tae piss in the bucket... Wullie and Jean next door'll be rumbling about wi each other... making the bed springs go squee-eak, squee-eak. If ever it was quiet at night, I'd be petrified. I'd think I was the last man alive".

Thom effectively fiddles with chronology and the echoing themes of the various voices reflect the intense interconnectedness of Traveller families. Names are handed down through the generations and the care of distant relations' babies shared. The strong sense of intimacy, physical and familial of this unique community is portrayed with verve, revealed as sometimes claustrophobic, but always essential to their way of life.

Thom has an extraordinary gift for seeing ordinary things in new ways. She describes the burns inflicted on Dawn by her ex-husband, as being "less angry than they used to be, faded and gone smooth, shiny, pinched in the middle like showflakes". A drunken man's footsteps are described as "uneven, like he's planting his feet in a snowdrift".

There is a lovely cadence and rhythm to her prose which is endemic to the feelings, expressions and dialect of the travellers' voices. And there is sensuality to her language, such as when Jock makes love to Lolly for the first time which reminds me of Ali Smith's erotic, cumulative style.

Her wise characterisations and the depiction of the travellers' full but hand-to-mouth existence are so insightful it did not surprise me to read at the end that she thanks "distant cousins and friends who generously shared histories". This novel is no academic treatise but a living, loving reinterpretation of history shared with us.

ALICE THOMPSON

The Scotsman, Saturday 11 April 2009

Wee Betsy's Big Mistake

As is often the case with debut novels, Eleanor Thom's contains a large chunk of autobiography. What matters, though, is what a writer does with that autobiographical element, and Thom manages to weave a delicate thread with hers that takes real-life events and makes something unusual and new with them. By telling the story of a Scottish Gypsy community, she has shone a light on a part of Scots society that is rarely portrayed, indeed, often not considered a part of society at all.

The injustice of how this group of people has forever been treated pervades this novel, which parallels two stories of powerlessness and exclusion. First up is Dawn, who has brought up her young daughter, Maeve, far from the Highland town where she grew up. Dawn has long been estranged from her parents; perhaps the beginning of their estrangement was when she was

handed over, as a little girl, to her aunt Shirley, while her mother was busy with her new baby sister, Linda. Dawn grew close to her aunt, the only one who understood, years later, when Dawn's new husband began beating her. Now Shirley has died, and Dawn has returned to the town where her ex-husband still lives, to an uncertain welcome from her parents.

Running parallel to this 1990s-set story is that of Jock, a member of the town's Gypsy community. His story is told in 1954, and begins as he is being fatally beaten in an Elgin prison. Crucial to what has brought him here, to an early, violent death, is detailed in a third narrative, that of a little girl, Wee Betsy, his niece. The damage little children do to adult relations, sometimes unwittingly, sometimes deliberately, has long been a popular motif, from Hartley to McEwan, but Thom gives it an added dimension.

Little children often take revenge because they have been excluded from an adult world they long to join, but Wee Betsy sees everything, is included in everything. Her exclusion isn't from within her own community, but she understands, at some subconscious level, that she wants to join with the rest of society. Hence the fantasy she indulges in of Jock, her uncle, dating her beloved schoolteacher, Miss Webster. When that illusion is shattered, Wee Betsy takes revenge, albeit without fully intending it.

It is Dawn who gradually discovers the truth of Jock's death as she rummages through her aunt Shirley's belongings, and in the course of this, also finds out the truth of her own family background. Thom resists the temptation to offer easy, comforting reconciliations: there is a point to be made here. A death has gone unavenged, and the need for reparation, a reparation which will never come, doesn't die with the victim. Injustice lasts for a long time.

Thom may have grown up in north London – she is also a graduate of Glasgow University's Creative Writing Programme – but her ear for Scots dialect is remarkable. Both Jock and Wee Betsy use Scots, but it's Auld Betsy, Jock's mother, who is the real challenge. Her voice is the vibrant, strong, extreme voice in the novel, helping to break up what can sometimes be a single tone that runs through the other voices in the book. The fearsomeness of her character is superbly realised in her voice, yet Thom also manages to bring out the musicality of the dialect – not an easy feat.

Based partly on Thom's own family history, this debut has an authenticity that does not rely exclusively on the truth. But it's not just the novelising of real events that produces this authenticity, makes the fiction seem real. What makes a story believable is convincing detail, and Thom has a good eye for that, too. It's a cliché to call a new writer promising, but in Thom's case it is true. It will be interesting to see what she does next.

LESLEY McDOWELL

The Sunday Herald, 05 April 2009

Travelling in the right direction

THE contribution of Scotland's travelling folk to the cultural landscape, particularly in the north-east, should never be forgotten. As jealous custodians of a rich tradition of songs, stories and folklore, they wove themselves into the fabric of the nation. But theirs is a story that, like the passing of their way of life, has slipped into the mists of time. It is a story that deserves more than the mere footnote it currently holds: a history of heart-tugging romance and intrigue, of a community held together by fierce familial ties, existing on wit and wisdom, on craft and craftsmanship. Theirs is a rich and powerful voice, but it is also an outsider's, one that whispers from the margins of society.

An unconventional, itinerant life brings stigma, which gives rise to prejudice. It is impossible to tell the story of Scotland's travelling community without placing it against a backdrop of adversity. Eleanor Thom's *The Tin-Kin* is a powerful and moving novel which weaves the tale of travelling folk in the north of Scotland with a modern narrative.

Dawn is the main protagonist in the latter. When her Aunt Shirley dies, she finds herself back in her oppressive small-town Highland community for the first time in years. As she goes about tidying up her relative's affairs, she stumbles upon an album of old photographs. In one, a young couple are pictured on a beach; another shows an old woman with hands on her hips and head thrown back in laughter; in another, little girls pose in hand-me-down kilts with toothless smiles. Why did her aunt treasure these pictures for so long? Do they reveal something significant about the family history?

Dawn's search for an answer becomes a search for identity; one that is conducted in the company of her young daughter Maeve and the malevolent presence of her estranged husband. Dawn's story is interwoven with that of a travelling family in the 1950s. The narrative voice flits expertly between different members: there is wee Betsy (the granddaughter), Auld Betsy (the grandmother) and Jock (the son). Each tale has a significance to the life of Dawn.

The constantly shifting narrative voice reflects the impermanency of the travellers' existence. It is most successful when telling the story of wee Betsy, an impish young traveller whose exploits indirectly give rise to tragic consequences. The narrative voice may traverse generations, but Thom's exploration of the significance of family history, and how the secrets of the past impact on the present, brings a wonderful cohesion.

The story of the travellers reveals a genuine sense of community. This is manifest in a profound closeness, both physically and emotionally. These are people who literally live on top of each other, but who are bound together both by the poverty of their existence and a shared history. The minutiae of family life - the so-called untidy moments - are celebrated as a reflection of intimacy and love. Theirs is also a moral code that is portrayed as more liberal and accepting than society at the time. Prejudices are never far from the surface,

to be found in every disapproving glance from the locals. This petty, almost casual, bigotry eventually culminates in a brutal incident which forms the core of the novel.

This is a poignant and moving story that gathers pace as the book progresses. The descriptive language is wonderfully evocative. "Big Ellen beamed, her cheeks like two sponge cakes rising. She crouched down as far as her great belly would allow, a circus elephant on its knees ... Jock's wrinkles don't stay there all the time ... He can wipe them off with a hand, not like Granny with her mashed-tattie face."

If there is an over-emphasis on descriptive language at times then that is a minor quibble about an accomplished and thought-provoking debut.

MARTIN GREIG

The Independent, Friday 03 April 2009

Rising Star: Eleanor Thom, author

Much of modern Scottish fiction stems from a realists' revolt against the dewy-eyed pieties of the 'Kailyard School'. Glasgow-based Eleanor Thom is young - born 1979 - and clearly nobody's follower or mimic, but her debut novel *The Tin-Kin* (Duckworth Overlook) shows that anti-kailyard grit and candour is alive and kicking hard.

Thom is a graduate from Glasgow University's creative-writing MA who won a New Writing Ventures award for one chapter of her novel. She researched her own family history to construct this look-back-in-wonder story of a 1990s single mother unearthing the harsh life of her forebears, the Travellers of Elgin.

Divergent lives mean contrasting languages, as Thom endows the Travellers of the 1950s (it feels more like the middle ages) with an expressive Scots voice that never slips into mere pastiche. These vagabond ancestors have nobility to spare – but nostalgia is not for sale here.

BOYD TONKIN

www.dovegreyreader.typepad.com, Monday, March 23, 2009

***The Tin-Kin* by Eleanor Thom**

I'm easily scared off a book by dialect.

It took me years to conquer George Eliot's *Adam Bede*, perhaps it's because the reading slows me down so I have to be in the right mood for some snail's pace progress. But then I coped with *The Colour Purple* and if we're talking about Scottish dialect I loved Susan Ferrier's *Marriage* which all felt like enough confidence-boosting positives to launch me on the remarkable

journey that has been *The Tin-Kin* by Eleanor Thom and recently published by Duckworth.

Years ago I emerged from a few weeks in the company of Susan Ferrier talking like a native Scot and likewise with Eleanor Thom I am now fluent in Ingressive Pulmonic Speech and who'd have thought that.

I've spent a wee while trying to perfect the whole Gaelic Gasp.

This is speech pronounced using an intake of breath, like a gasp which can easily be mistaken for shock, surprise or even a heart attack or suffocation which is probably worth remembering next time I'm in Glasgow. Identified in speech far and wide from the Maritime Provinces of Canada to Scandinavia apparently and this all helped me greatly in the reading of this book because I will own up that I read quite a lot of the dialect chapters aloud and you'd have thought me born and bred.

But how on earth has Eleanor Thom, managed to write this?

I remember thinking the same about Susan Ferrier, and *The Tin-Kin* is quite a mix of the auld and the newer versions depending on whether the voice is old or young and with some 'normal' in between making this book a truly remarkable achievement which I hope gets the recognition it deserves.

Dawn has inherited her Auntie Shirley's flat and leaving her violent ne'er do well partner Winston she takes up residence in this home of her own with her young daughter Maeve. Dawn was mysteriously sent to live with Shirley when her mother had a second baby and was well acquainted with Shirley's mysterious little locked cupboard of secrets though never the contents. Once Dawn has found the key and the cupboard gives up its mysteries, her need to unravel Shirley's past deepened right alongside mine and that was all deepened further as I worked to grasp what initially felt like a foreign language.

I had to concentrate hard as I tried to get my tongue around the language and make sense of it because through a series of flashbacks to the 1950s most of the story is told through the voices of a family of travellers, Auld Betsy, Wee Betsie and Jock interspersed with Dawn's increasing understanding of a past in which she has been an unwitting participant.

Then there's the Batchie Woman and her gift of the visions.

As for ingressive pulmonic speech well it's true, I happened to catch a radio programme from Stornoway on the Isle of Lewis discussing Harris Tweed and as I listened I heard it, I know exactly what it is now and I'd never noticed it

before.

Amongst the major achievements of a book like *The Tin-Kin* for me was an affirmation of a lost way of life, that of the old travellers, frequently judged and maligned and the victims of astonishing prejudice, yet communities alive to and vibrant with their traditions. Above all Eleanor Thom firmly dispels the stereotypical myth that somehow the children of the travellers were neglected. So they might not have seen too much soap and perhaps they had 'beasties' in their hair and been excluded from school for months on end but these people knew how to love their children and that is all in stark contrast to those around them.

In the end Dawn must do what Dawn must do and to say more would be to ruin, but it has been interesting to discover that the book is based on Eleanor Thom's own family history.

Eleanor's mother's family are Scottish travellers and her grandfather shares Jock's fate (which I won't divulge), and it was whilst exploring photos with them and then talking that a degree of shame about their Traveller heritage was revealed. As well as acknowledging and reclaiming that heritage (I think we are back on the subject of bearing witness once more, it's everywhere I look now) Eleanor Thom has carefully redressed the balance of prejudice and restored a degree of pride.

This a book that requires careful and deliberate reading but pays precious dividends if you do, in fact expect a unique experience and if you too fancy emerging as if to the Highlands born, names in comments because Duckworth's have three prize draw copies of *The Tin-Kin* ready to send worldwide and Rocky will wear a kilt with a be-jewelled dirk tucked in his sock for this one.

DOVEGREYREADER

The Morning Star, Sunday 08 March 2009

The Tin-Kin

A YOUNG man lies kicked to death at an Elgin police station.

Fifty years on, a young mother, hiding from her violent husband, inherits her aunt's flat and starts a journey of discovery which links her to this man.

Intrigued by a cupboard that is kept permanently locked, she sets out to find its hidden key. When she does, its contents puzzle her.

There are some photographs of a handsome young man cuddling a blonde woman on a beach. Others show two small children in hand-me-down kilts and a large smiling woman.

A local Scottish tinker family, who have been called to clear out unwanted furniture from her flat, hint at her connection with them.

Following the trail to a tinker camp outside town, she gradually learns the history of the dead young man from two old women.

Eleanor Thom's fine debut novel gives a revealing view of Scottish tinker life in the 1950s using the local dialect.

It is a tale of poverty and persecution, spasmodic education, family celebrations, music, dance, story-telling, drunkenness and sheer hard work.

Gradually, Dawn and her daughter Maeve find their own roots and direct connections not only with Jock, the young railway worker who was killed by the police, but also with hitherto well-kept secrets in their own family.

JEAN TURNER

Bookseller, December 2008

Bookseller's Choice

Eleanor Thom's *The Tin-Kin* is based on stories from her mother's family, who were travellers near Elgin. A young man dies a brutal death in a police cell and for many years after, family secrets and events are kept hidden. Partly written in dialect, Thom uses the voices of young and old with haunting effect to tell their story and gradually the truth is revealed. It is both a poignant and multi-layered story and an evocative glimpse into a way of life that is no more.'

SARAH CLARKE, Director, The Torbay Bookshop.

Quotes

'Elegantly observed, painstaking, tender and truthful. [Thom's] humanity and precision recall Jessie Kesson at her best. Luring the reader deeper with its gentle, unflinching sense of voice, this is a book that's beautifully realised, hugely rewarding.'

JANICE GALLOWAY

'A thoughtful, intelligent and well-structured book. As it shifts backwards and forwards in time, it offers a powerful insight into the way that tragic events from the past can reverberate into the future.'

CLARE MORRALL

Booker-shortlisted author of *Astonishing Splashes of Colour*

'Thom mines the history of one of Scotland's forgotten communities with insight and empathy. This is an elegant novel about love and loss, written in spare, lucid prose.'

ALAN BISSETT

'Eleanor Thom ... creates an entire 'world' with great economy and elegance. Her style is at once natural and impeccably honed so that the overall effect is of that kind of realism which tugs at the heart.'

CANDIDA CLARK