

# Laurie Smith reviews Jamie McKendrick, Peter Bennet and Theresa Lola

---

## **Anomaly**

Jamie McKendrick  
Faber, £14.99

## **Mischief**

Peter Bennet  
Bloodaxe, £9.95

## **In Search of Equilibrium**

Theresa Lola  
Nine Arches Press, £9.99

We may be at one of those moments when poetry's tectonic plates are shifting: like the 1790s when Wordsworth and Coleridge accepted that the self, no-one else, validates experience; or the 1910s when Hulme, Pound and others started writing unrhymed imagist poems; or the 1950s when Robert Lowell began writing about his mental breakdown and encouraged his students Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton to do the same. The prime mover at present is social media – poets can now perform their poems directly on YouTube or Instagram and post them to dozens, hundreds or thousands of followers.

However, this is a *cause* of the change, not the change itself. Poets still want their poems published in books because books have the permanence and therefore prestige that social media will always lack. But having a social media following boosts book sales. This is shown by the sales of poetry books and

pamphlets. As reported by the publishers' bible Nielsen Bookscan, poetry sales declined from £8.4 million in 2009 to £6.4 million in 2012, but have now risen in successive years to £12.3 million in 2018. And the increase in sales is chiefly of young poets' work to young people – most of the growth is by and to people aged 24 to 35.

What does this tell us? It tells us that older literature-based poets without media awareness now risk being seen as old-fashioned as analogue watches and weighing machines. Two of the books I'm reviewing exemplify this, while the third points energizingly to the future.

Jamie McKendrick was born in 1955 and **Anomaly** is his seventh collection in addition to an anthology of Italian poems and three volumes of translations. From the first line in **Anomaly**, which a note tells us comes from a play by the 17th century playwright Thomas Heywood, almost the whole book maintains a literary composure. Of the 40 poems, seven have literary epigraphs to establish their tone; six are about works of visual art in whole or part, including *La Tempesta* which the reader needs to know (but isn't told) is about a painting by Giorgione; at least eight have literary references including unidentified phrases from Pound, Wallace Stevens, Borges and Rimbaud which the reader is expected to recognise unaided; four are translations; three including *La Tempesta* have Italian titles; and *Lives of the Artists* gains greatly from knowing, again without explanation, that it is also the title of a 16th century book by Giorgio Vasari.

All poets are performers to a greater or lesser extent and it is notable how fully McKendrick adopts the role of the European litterateur. All the poems are written with beautiful clarity and there are sometimes incidental pleasures of wordplay as in *Quince* which is about a painting of a quince:

It hangs on a string, a world to itself,  
a quintessence, a quiddity of quince...

The next poem, consisting of five three-line sections about quinces and paintings thereof, is called *Sequence* (get it?).

Living people appear in the poems infrequently. There is a gently nostalgic account of growing up in Liverpool (*A Walk in the Park*); a satirical response to a poor review in which a female companion appears and makes a literary comment (*A Bad Notice*); and a wily humorous poem about sitting at the next table to a famous French poet, Yves Bonnefoy, and being unable quite to hear what he is saying (*Translating Yves Bonnefoy*). The longest poem in the book, *St Michael-in-the Hamlet*, segues unconvincingly from a description of an ugly Liverpool church to an account of the poet's father's dementia. Only two poems have the strangeness and originality that suggest genuine inspiration: *Trauma* and *Hearing Voices*. These are two of the three prose poems in the book and perhaps indicate a direction McKendrick could fruitfully develop. Without such development it seems his work will appeal to a diminishing number of the similarly literary-minded.

The same considerations apply to Peter Bennet, but more so. Bennet was born in 1942 and *Mischief* is also his seventh collection. It has several similarities with McKendrick's: several epigraphs, numerous literary references which are explained in two pages of notes, few living people, some personal memories from the distant past. Bennet's writing throughout is clear and often imaginative but is finally uninvolved. The first of the two stanzas of one of the shorter poems, *A Helpmeet for the Protestant Mystics*, is a fair example.

She limps. She is inadequately shod  
and not dressed for the weather of the mind.  
She needs to find her way with arms extended  
to grope the insides of our skulls.  
As soon as she is with or even near us  
we start to see. Without her we are blind.

This is undeniably interesting and the images in the second and fourth lines are striking. We could be set up for some piercing insight into possession, delusion, an extreme mental state. But we aren't. As a note explains, the poem is based on an essay by Auden and the helpmeet turns in the second stanza into an entertainer with "applause again that led to curtain calls / when we were young". The poem expresses no feeling about the woman or the poet's view of her. She becomes a vague memory, remote and somehow muffled. This is true of the collection as a whole. In language, tone and subject, the poems could have been written at any time in the last hundred years. There is nothing in them vividly or unequivocally of the present.

Theresa Lola's debut collection, *In Search of Equilibrium*, is very different. Lola is British Nigerian, born in 1994, and her poems are haunted by feelings unfamiliar to many British readers – not just grief but the need to display grief in a religious setting and the resentment this provokes. Several of the poems focus on the dementia, death and burial of the poet's grandfather and the grief both felt and, more ambiguously, expected by her family. The religious setting is Christian, suggesting frequent attendance at communal worship, and the book begins with a version of The Lord's Prayer and ends with *Psalms 151* (a psalm that Lola has created as the Bible has only 150), which, above all, express anger at the expectations this creates of the poet.

God's will is a butcher's knife that cuts into the flesh  
to feed another plate of life's lessons.  
I swallowed my grandfather's suffering  
and my belly is bloated with life lessons.  
I guess thy will be done in his body,  
but on the condition he ends up in heaven.  
A man can't ask forgiveness for sins he can't  
remember.

There is an impressive density of feeling here, relating God's cruelty and teaching as being stuffed with food; 'swallowing' as both accepting and perhaps being fooled; the legalistic aspect of faith (I'll pray for his soul on condition it gets to heaven); and the problem of repentance for a man with dementia who isn't aware of his sins.

Poem after poem achieves this kind of density, whether in the context of communal worship where death is greeted with loud singing and musical instruments:

The aunties wearing hats as big as their mouths  
shake their heads like a tambourine  
when they see your seat empty in church.  
(*The Pastor's Daughter Refuses to be a Circle*)

or the requirement to display grief publicly:

The tailor says you have to get measured  
to make sure grief fits right on your body.  
If grief fits too tight it will suck movement out of you,  
make you as still as the dead you are mourning.  
(*Tailoring Grief*)

or recounting a counselling session for suicidal depression:

I am here because ten years have passed  
and the voices of bullies are jammed in my ears,  
surgeons will not remove what they cannot see.  
(*Crisis*)

It is rare for a debut collection by a young poet to be so death-haunted, but it is death-haunted in the same sense as Plath's *Ariel* and Sexton's *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. The comparison isn't fanciful. Lola's writing has a similar vividness and strength, and, of course, Plath and Sexton give her permission as mentors though, to her great credit, she doesn't imitate them.

The best poem in the book is *Black Marilyn* where Lola has escaped the pressures of family and is in a hotel room in Lagos. This has a photo of Marilyn Monroe which watches her

as I scrub my body  
like it's a house preparing for an estate agent's visit.  
I think Marilyn wants to say something to me,  
the way her mouth is always open  
like a cheating husband's zipper.

The tautness of Lola's imagery is evident again: the commercialism of the first simile prepares for the swift reference in the second to the belief that Monroe, like many 20th century starlets, achieved initial success by fellating powerful men and that parted bright red lips signified this availability. Lola registers she is in a war-torn country, but achieves a kind of celebration:

Every day I survive is worth a medal or two.  
I celebrate by buying more clothes than I can afford.  
I must be rich; my void is always building  
a bigger room to accommodate new things.

A third stanza of celebration of still being alive leads to the triumphant end of the fourth and last:

You can call me arrogant, call me black Marilyn.  
come celebrate with me,  
I am so beautiful death can't take his eyes off me.

This celebrates survival in a way that many people, particularly young people, will recognise and warm to. Lola's poems move with a speed and energy of someone familiar and at ease with social media, but achieve a power and density that reward re-reading on the page. This, I sense, is the tectonic shift that poetry is undergoing, so that poets unable to achieve this will come to be seen as having little to say to modern readers.

**Laurie Smith** is a founder member of *Magma* and has co-edited several issues. He teaches at King's College London and The City Lit in Holborn, London.