

# Andrew Neilson reviews Zohar Atkins, Angela Kirby and Penny Boxall

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## **Nineveh**

Zohar Atkins  
Carcenet, £9.99

## **Look Left, Look Right...**

Angela Kirby  
Shoestring Press, £10.00

## **Who Goes There?**

Penny Boxall  
Valley Press, £8.99

Zohar Atkins is described in his biography as a “poet, rabbi and theologian, based in New York”, which builds expectations from the off that this collection might stand out from the crowd. **Nineveh** certainly delivers on this promise and is one of the freshest debuts of recent years, with a clear sense of mission that ranges widely across secular and religious culture, utilising what Carcanet’s blurb describes as “jarring, contemporary Midrashim” – Rabbinical expositions and interpretations of Talmudic Scripture. In *The Binding of Isaac*, a “young Muslim is dying of bone cancer/ In an Israeli hospital” becomes Ishmael on the altar, while in *The Sin*, the Tower of Babel is “leveraged... into the brand of a Multinational Consulting Group”. The Atkins method is clearly illustrated by the opening poem, *Protest*, which insouciantly inhabits the voice of Jehovah:

No sooner do I say  
‘Let there be light’  
Then a horde of angels arrive  
With their signs.

‘No more oppression of darkness!’  
‘Stop occupying our empty wild.’  
‘Down with the visible!’  
‘God Should Know Better Than to Speak.’

God has a hard time in these poems, such as *In the Beginning* where He appears to suffer from writer’s block when it comes to the act of Creation itself: “His hands were too shaky. Other times he’d find a distraction”. The levity Atkins displays throughout does not disguise the seriousness of his intent and his often compelling critiques of contemporary life. The typical speaker in a Zohar Atkins poem, if not straight out of the Bible, is a figure adrift in late capitalism, seeking to negotiate our globalised, cloud-based moment in history, and it’s no surprise that international academia (CV) or business consulting (*Descent*, the aforementioned *The Sin*) feature in these poems. *Song of Myself (Apocryphal)* updates Whitman accordingly:

I am my own listserve,  
advertising job and fellowship opportunities  
for myself by myself to myself.

I sing of unpaid internships to my soul, O soul,  
and of passing controversies on which to take sides  
is to take the side of the self.

If there's a criticism to be made, it's that the language in *Nineveh* is not particularly worked. Atkins relies greatly on his (admittedly confident) tone and the register-switching inherent in his off-beat takes on familiar Old Testament stories such as *Cain and Abel* ("His argument was tight and his slides were sleek"), *David* ("The diagram changes with the business cycle") and *Two Great Lights* ("Two women came to Solomon's Court clutching an infant"). When Atkins puts more focus on the texture of his words, the sound play can be too obvious, such as *Poetry is Failure*:

Rift becomes drift.  
Drift becomes draft,  
and riven,  
we drive on.

Overall, the collection feels over-long and repetitive, in part due to this looseness of language, which seldom sticks with the reader, leaving longer poems such as *Outside Echoes* as fairly indigestible on the page. The ideas in *Nineveh* are often zinging around nicely but a little more patience in the execution could take Zohar Atkins to greater heights.

*Look Left, Look Right...* is Angela Kirby's fifth poetry collection in fifteen years and her first since 2015's *The Days After Always*, a New and Selected Poems. A poet who came to publication late in life, Kirby's work is always deceptively energetic and this collection is no exception. Poems that look unflinchingly at old age and death, such as *Winter is Well Advanced* and *Letter to my Mother*, go hand in hand with poems such as *Bienvenidos* and *To Flavius*, which almost leer with their worldly appetites and bawdy, swaggering humour.

In *Just Visiting* these two poles of grim inquiry and lashing wit synthesise to carefully understated effect:

We visit them, the living dead  
in residential homes  
which smell of piss and disinfectant  
where flowers are plastic  
and the carers smile firmly  
and we wouldn't do their job  
for all the tea in Tesco

This plain-speaking feels entirely appropriate, while the bathetic line on Tesco is suitably self-accusatory.

There are times when Kirby's creative urges take her down some wrong turns, such as the perplexing attempt to re-write Robert Frost's unerringly great poem *Design*, but one gets the sense that the odd moment of misjudgement also brings with it surprising moments like *A Gardener Reflects in the Duchesse's Potager* and the moving *Rebuilding the Luminous City From the Detritus of My Past*:

...I will insist on a plethora of pawnshops, cobblers,  
clog

makers, matchbox sellers, purveyors of tripe, rag-and-  
bone men  
rancorous bag ladies, telegraph boys, chair caners,  
knife grinders,

onion sellers, horse-drawn milk floats and brewers'  
drays...

*Look Left, Look Right...* navigates its subject matter cannily and sees Angela Kirby still striding very much ahead.

If *Nineveh* felt a little too diffuse and repetitive at points, then *Who Goes There?* by Penny Boxall risks a certain slightness, at just over thirty pages of poetry (and about fifty less pages than Atkins), although the quality of this second collection is decidedly high. Boxall, a winner of the Edwin Morgan Poetry Award for her Eyewear debut *Ship of the Line*, has found a new publisher in Valley Press, and this impressive Scarborough-based outfit continues

to excel in producing handsome paperback editions. **Who Goes There?** is the most attractive of the books under review here – a point only made because all three collections represent a happy increase in production values among many independent poetry publishers in recent times.

Boxall's poetry matches the production values, showcasing some fine lyrics. The collection is dedicated to the poet's relatives, and starts strongly with a poem on a (family?) funeral, *Caretaking*, before exploring various historic personages, again possibly ancestors of Boxall, in poems such as *Workbox* and *Godwit's Silhouette*. The former of these demonstrates Boxall's deft handling of rhythm and a pleasing music, such as the assonance between 'haul' and 'how' in its final lines:

And man, you're a piece of work anyway.  
Consider your beard, your pièce de résistance,  
your tangling mass, your miraculous haul.  
It's thick with the threads that you spun for yourself,  
that you wove though you didn't know how.

As well as this attention to sound, Penny Boxall also possesses a keen sense of when to bear down on her verse – running through all the gears of what she can do – and when to ease off and adopt a more casual approach. The close of *King of the Folly* is simultaneously meditative and conversational:

The mornings are my best times. I awake  
to birdsong and the sound of air.  
The rain I relish, too; a physical  
exertion of God's immanence, a hint.  
It alters all, releases that strange smell  
– though 'smell' is not the word – and pricks the earth  
with loveliness: an inward pulse like nothing  
in the world. It makes my hair stand up. I live  
in these huge moments of capacity –  
my plot, my furtherment, my little will.

A lesser writer would have homed in on the choiceness of the right word for "that strange smell"

(the word being 'petrichor', a poetry word if ever there was one) but Boxall holds off, and in doing so earns the Shakespearian grandeur of those closing lines.

Penny Boxall is a poet of the particular and strange and her work in **Who Goes There?** often takes oddities as a launch pad – a wartime stunt by the secret services, or a Ravensburger jigsaw spilling out across a road – before alighting on further peculiarities through her delightfully finicky manipulation of thought and language. Only a truly inventive poet could take the story of Mary Bateman (known as the "Yorkshire witch") and get to the wondrous alliteration of "The startled hen announces Armageddon/with its arse" (*The Prophet Hen of Leeds*).

In similar fashion, *Dr Johnson's Wasp* sees Boxall take a definition from Johnson's Dictionary, using it to fashion a delicate lyric which comes close to summarising the concerns present throughout **Who Goes There?** – as many of these poems seek to represent things, or hear them, 'outside' of the mind:

The wasp wears its nipped livery like a footman.  
If a man could hear anything outside his mind  
the wasp's clockwork *tink* against the glass could let  
itself in,  
reveal as its cause this brisk insect, so unlike a bee.

This collection is all nipped livery and briskness and comes with the lasting sting of the true poet. It will be fascinating to see where Penny Boxall goes next.

**Andrew Neilson** lives and works in London. His poems and essays have recently appeared in *The Hopkins Review*, *Stand* and the Scottish Poetry Library's **Best Scottish Poems**.