

# Kym Deyn reviews Rachel Mann, Leontia Flynn and Marjorie Lotfi

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## **Eleanor Among the Saints**

Rachel Mann  
Carcenet, £11.99

## **Taking Liberties**

Leontia Flynn  
Jonathan Cape, £12.00

## **The Wrong Person to Ask**

Marjorie Lotfi  
Bloodaxe Books, £10.99

The first thing I do with *Eleanor Among the Saints* by Rachel Mann is (accidentally) upend most of a cup of coffee over it. The teenagers I'm teaching laugh at me as I hastily mop up, desperate to save a book I've been looking forward to since reading *A Kingdom of Love*, Rachel Mann's first collection. I don't think Mann or her semi-mythical Eleanor would mind the coffee stains – *Eleanor Among the Saints* is a book deeply concerned with human mess as well as the Divine. “El, we have wonder, the thisness of what bodies become beyond scar, wound, / Beyond use and fuck” Mann writes in *Eleanor and Rolandina in The City of God*, a poetic conversation between Eleanor and Rolandina Ronchaia, a fourteenth century Venetian trans sex worker.

Eleanor 'John' Rykener was a fourteenth century seamstress, embroiderer and sex worker, recorded as

having slept with both nuns and priests. Mann writes into the gaps in Eleanor's history and record to come out with something more than the sum of its parts: gorgeous language, visceral, decadent and tender, full of Eleanor's imagined faces: saint and widow, lyric poet and wife; mercurial, shifting, but always defiant. “I / Am Ellie of the Cut, Factory Fortnight Queen, / ... I break your lines” (*Eleanor's Boast*). In her notes, Mann writes that these versions of Eleanor are an “attempt at an imaginary archive”, and the attempt is a successful one. Eleanor dances through mentions of Aquinas, Saint Katherine, Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich, the last two her near-contemporaries. Something new is made in the way Mann moves through mediaeval sex worker to saint, and makes it not a chasm between the two, but, with a flourish, overlays them.

The collection is divided into three parts: *Eleanor Among the Saints*; *Praise*; and *A Charm to Change Sex*. *Eleanor Among the Saints*, the eponymous opening section, is the most startling in its originality but also for its complexity, thickly layered as it is with saints, mediaeval language, fury and love. The next two sections are perhaps less complex, but no less deftly woven. If I missed Eleanor as a character, it was because of Mann's skill in (re)imagining her. *Praise* touches on worship, the pandemic, and grief. One of the stand-out poems is *Earth to Earth*: “as if wind and water held a secret speaking, and earth knew all places we have ever been and shall ever go”. *A Charm to Change Sex* is rich with image and incantation, interweaving faith and trans

identity seamlessly: “Body too only a subset of making, a stored magic” (*Envoi*). The body in Mann’s work is as full of holiness as it is of queerness, of mess and filth and life, and it’s this nuance, playful and inventive, grief-stricken and furious, that makes this collection one of the best of this year so far.

**Taking Liberties** is Leontia Flynn’s fifth collection. Her subjects are wide-ranging: cities to roadside service stations, Nina Simone to single motherhood; her focus is the minutiae of daily life, flies and houseplants, all captured in sparse four-line stanzas. Her tone is bleak, pared-down and wry. It feels like a significant departure to her previous collection, **Radio**: with its riffs on Catullus and T.S. Eliot, there was an exuberance and life there that feels missing throughout **Taking Liberties**. There are moments, of course: “Menorah // after menorah / that lifts its arms / under plane trail / and cloud scud” (*Mid-term in Belfast*) is a stunning image for magnolia buds. *When the Midwives* is one of the strongest poems in the entire collection, for the humour and long lines that give Flynn some space to let her images breathe: “Little one, heretic, wild man come back from the Whale Road; / inside’s outlier, now lying outside my whole ken —” the poet writes of her daughter. This is unusual in **Taking Liberties**, which, at times, feels as though its images are restrained to their detriment.

There are times that the sparse tone removes something essential from Flynn’s work. *In Arts Centres* feels more like delineated prose: “The evening showcase / of new feminist voices, / however, / has sold out.” and offers the unconvincing image “Their eyes shine brightly // as espresso taps”. It is particularly egregious in ‘*The Mother of Parliaments...*’ where Flynn writes:

You move between your parents’  
opposing fronts  
like the little square puck  
in the 1975 Atari  
home consul video game ‘Pong’

Consul could be intentional, as opposed to a misspelling of console, a dry nod to the parliaments in the title, but it doesn’t hit home for me.

I also find this in *At Motorway Service Stations* which ends “a reader re-finds her page // in the story of life.” *In New York City* is a particularly odd poem for such an experienced poet, it being an account of a journey taken by Frederick Douglass, each stop on the way laid out. Impressive, if only for the fact that it doesn’t contain a single image.

Frederick Douglass  
having taken, from Baltimore,  
first, a northbound train  
of the Philidelphia,  
Wilmington and Baltimore Railroad,  
and travelled to Harford County,  
Maryland,

If poetry lives and dies with its images, then much of this book is obituary.

When Flynn breaks from the four-line stanza pattern of this collection, something living seeps out. Towards the end of the book there are poems about tortoises, budgies, cats and houseplants, where we suddenly have the “saucy eye of a budgie” (*Budgie Poem*) and “an analogue box-TV / tuned to one channel: *tortoise*” (*Tortoise Poem*), a perfect image that is perhaps my favourite in the whole book. Then in *All of the People*, Flynn’s exuberance, until now only hinted at, returns full of humour: “I eat clean but train dirty. That’s *perfection*” and where a “Pliosaur fossil swims through lucent air”, both in a poem that reflects, crisp and acidic, on the frailties of modern life.

What **Taking Liberties** proves is that even a poet at the height of their powers can strip their work back too far, and the best work is that which has allowed itself to take up the space it needs.

**The Wrong Person to Ask** is Marjorie Lotfi’s first collection. It moves through an Iranian childhood, to arrival in America and then Scotland. It witnesses revolution and global injustices, the tenderness of everyday life, motherhood and family history. **The Wrong Person to Ask** is as much about home as what we leave behind to make one. Stories and history are laid out with a lightness of touch: in *Maman Borzog*, Lotfi recounts her great-grandmother buying a crucifix for her American daughter-in-law:

*As long as you are here, I will be shelter,  
will walk the length of my own bazaar  
and ask the jeweller to sell me a crucifix  
give it to you with these heavy words.*

*Believe in something*

Lotfi recounts the 1978 Iranian revolution, the fear of it, in just a few lines:

There was the game of counting  
gunshots in a riot,

[...]

the game of the school set on fire  
while we were still in it,"

*(The Game)*

This is poetry of childhood, and the horrors that children should not, but do, face, both then and now. Lotfi moves deftly from Iran, to America, and Gaza, writing from photos in a powerful act of ekphrasis. Lotfi is a master of establishing so much in a few lines, as in *The End of the Road*, a sequential poem and a deeply moving portrait which completes the collection's first half:

There's a moment every morning  
when she forgets - opens her mouth  
to her mother tongue and finds  
the silence foreign.

Lofti's poetry is deceptively simple: clear eyed in its choice of imagery, but always beautifully constructed. Even a sea gooseberry caught in a rockpool is given careful attention while it is "wanting / reassurance that the tide will rise, its horizon / of imprisonment will shift" (*Sea Gooseberry (Pleurobrachia)*). There is a sense of tenderness throughout, a focus on detail and sensation: "Here you touch / breath before you hear it. Here, you hold down / the pulse rising against the bone" (*and this is how it begins*).

I've been known to speak about emotional through-roads in poetry, the journey which a poet takes you on under the surface of the words: Lotfi creates rip-tides, pulling you along unexpectedly, taking you wherever you need to be. In *The Trunk*, she writes "she leaves its lid open / so the scent of the child will fade, so she won't be tempted / to put her head inside that box to breathe", lines gutting in their clarity. In *Citizen*, Lotfi writes of identity and belonging in a recurring dream: "I push through the exit / and walk home in rain / to a house / that isn't mine, in a country that isn't mine". She interrogates what it means to find a home somewhere, and ultimately decides "And what is home if not the choice — / over and over again — to stay?" (*The Hebridean Crab Apple*).

This is an impressive debut, spanning years, countries and homelands, all expertly woven together.

**Kym Deyn** is a writer and publisher based in Newcastle. Their pamphlets include ***Primers Vol.6, Dionysia*** and ***Unfurl***, a collaborative fiction chapbook.