

Elontra Hall reviews

Fiona Benson, Antony Vahni Capildeo and Brittany Rogers

Midden Witch

Fiona Benson
Jonathan Cape, £13

Polkadot Wounds

Antony Vahni Capildeo
Carcenet, £12.99

Good Dress

Brittany Rogers
Tin House, \$16.95

What does it mean to be an outsider? And what happens when those on the outside decide to lean into that status as a means of resistance? Each of these collections explore this idea by degrees, providing a dazzling array of perspectives and possibilities.

Fiona Benson's latest offering, ***Midden Witch***, delves deeply into history, folklore, and yes – like the title suggests – witchcraft. Benson's opening section, *Discovery of Witchcraft* begins with an instructional incantation, one which sets the tone for the collection as a whole.

*Anoint your eyes
with sap of common elder
and you may find
where witches gather.*

This poem's succinctness and use of near rhyme, "elder...gather", help to ease the reader into the milieu of

modes and tones Benson uses throughout ***Midden Witch***. Benson uses this kind of musicality, and a range of soundscapes to build on this theme. Supporting references to folkloric figures like Babushka, Robin Goodfellow, and Jenny Greenteeth (to name a few), as well as actual historical documents and people (*The Bill Against Conjurations And Witchcraftes And Sorcery and Enchantments, Henry VIII, 1541-2: Cut Up, Rearranged*) her soundscapes provide sonorous texture and grounding for the work. The three-time TS Eliot shortlistee displays her skill in this collection through her ability to use the collection's central focus to illuminate and parse other themes: parenthood, abuse of power, caretaking, fear of the unknown/other, as well as the perils of non-conformity and groupthink, to name a few.

What did we
fill her with, but hunger and neglect and how to be cruel –
and it's too late to be sorry now – though we're sorry now
she calls our children to the water and holds them down.
(*Jenny Greenteeth, ii*)

Here, we get a 'backstory' of sorts for Jenny Greenteeth: voiced by an initially-detached speaker, the poem becomes more reflective and confessional as the collective 'we' who made her suffer unduly consider their treatment of her and how it was, also, ultimately to their own detriment. No one, Benson tells us, is safe from the ill-effects of prejudice and persecution.

This is only one of a number of instances where Benson uses history, her linguistic prowess, and empathic imagination to elucidate the larger themes of abuse of

power, the perils of being different, and groupthink. That is not to say the collection is harrowing the whole way through. In the Exorcisms section, for example, there are a number of very tender moments, even in the midst of anger or danger.

One day this will be
a story you tell
in the past tense

...
Try not to hate the snake.

...
It did not know
there was room in this world
for you both.

(*In Case of Snakebite*)

and when that black snake
whiplashed across the steps in Italy
I threw my daughter behind me
and screened her with my body;
(*Spirit Midden With Slow Worm & Snake*)

This collection is at its best in poems like *Transformation: Galinthis* where she briefly turns to Greek myth and *Exorcism: I'll Give You Something to Cry About*. Where *Wild Horses* explores the relationship between parent and child, and *Wisp* laments the speaker's many miscarriages, it is as a result of Benson's masterful control of language that reaches out to us as readers to help bridge the gap between history, persona, language and feeling.

Polkadot Wounds is a very different collection. On first reading this collection, I was lost. With no easily identifiable central speaker to latch onto, I felt adrift. It was only on my second reading that I found my feet and recognized that this collection – from its diction to its order – deliberately defies any attempt to impose upon it a singular narrative.

Polkadot Wounds is ripe with imagery and Capildeo's playful soundscapes, and associative leaps often make this collection feel utterly whimsical:

the stones spoke owls;
the owls spoke walls;

the walls spoke moss;
the moss spoke most –
of nothing;
(*Divining Dorothy*)

The grounding in this collection then comes from the subject matter, which is either thinly veiled, as in *Still, Still*:

Think on such things while you
wait, while they fail to raise
a vein, when the raised vein
is childsize, when they save
on equipment, and won't
change needles. Hold your arm.

or presented barefaced, as in *Turn and Live*:

Windrush
is the name of a ship
not of a generation
Windrush
is the name of a ship
not of any situation

Here too, as in **Midden Witch**, religion and faith cut a path through the work, providing by turns light (*Profession*) and darkness (*Never Have I Ever*). However, unlike Benson's collection – which feels keenly focused on the exploration of one idea and its varying but related branches – **Polkadot Wounds** flows like a river, its unexpected twists and turns leaving the reader to either sift for connections between poems, or to simply brace for the next jump and revel in the sensation of the poem on their skin.

Hear her relax release
grammar case by case
like dressage like a dressing
like a dismount like a mountain
like a tourniquet like a ticket
tossed into, sunlit-perfect,
(*I is a Pronoun*)

From the moment that publication of **Good Dress** was announced, I was impatient to read it. Rogers is a

Black poet with a large national platform in the USA (VS, Poetry Foundation) and a fellow Detroiter, so I was interested to learn more about her poetics and the ways in which Detroit itself might permeate the work. I was not disappointed. Rogers' speakers embrace a myriad of identities and wear them proudly, thus shining a light on what it is to be a Black American from Detroit in the 21st Century.

The number and sequencing of Rogers' *Ice Cam* poems (think *Kiss Cam* at a sporting event, but for jewelry – especially diamond-encrusted) provides not only an indication of her ability to create multiple emotional palettes from a single idea, but also an insight into her skill in threading the needle between confrontation and self-awareness:

Now that we are close enough to greet by first name,
I look out at the sea of jewelry and see
how a game can be a memorial,
how the body becomes an altar.

...

This grief heavy, wrapped around our throats.
Oh, how it makes us casket sharp,
so flashy the camera
can't bear to look away.

(Ice Cam, Little Caesars Arena, February 2023)

Here, Rogers uses the present tense and startling metaphors to create a powerful image of community within which grief is visual, tactile, almost morbidly attractive. Below however, another *Ice Cam* poem does something tonally opposite:

Your problem is

our nerve, thick as tobacco smoke.
You wish we'd get rid of it.
We know. We know.
The gold is just a cover.

(Ice Cam, Little Caesars Arena, January 2022)

Strategically placed throughout the collection, Rogers' *Ice Cam* poems use direct address and repetition to speak to Detroiters and non-Detroiters alike, providing validation and comfort for people

from Detroit – and places similar to it – and insight to outsiders about what it is like to be a Detroiter: the anger at the 'nerve' of people from a place like Detroit to exist in the first place, let alone at be confident in that existence.

The collection moves beyond identity and autobiography, however, and addresses the pertinent themes of coming-of-age and mental health, among others. For example, in *Intake Form*, Rogers uses an actual couples' counselling intake form as a frame to explore the untidy nature of relationships, both with one's partner and with one's self.

... *My man*
says he loves me incessantly. I believe he thinks he
means it. My mama says she
just ain't want me to inherit her mistakes but I am
already twice married. If
he at the store five minutes too long, I think he
ain't coming home.

When he says "I miss you," I ask, "are you sure?"

Here, Rogers' use of AAVE (African-American Vernacular English) and prose-like verse helps to create a speaker who, in certain communities, would be cast out for seeking help. But also a speaker that moves us so that we understand and identify, to some extent, with their struggle.

By turns proud, beautiful, haunting, joyous, warm, tender, and hopeful, Rogers is unafraid to plumb darker depths and takes great pains to highlight the soaring beauty and warmth of the city and its people. In this way, **Good Dress** becomes a heartfelt ode to the city and its people.

Elontra Hall is a Black-American poet based in Northampton. He has been published in *HeadFake*, *Butcher's Dog*, *Magma*, *Propel*, *Shō* and *Prairie Schooner* and broadcast on BBC 4's *Poetry Please*.