

LAUNCHING *THE FATHER OF OCTOPUS WRESTLING, AND OTHER SMALL FICTIONS*

Scorpio Books, 31 August 2019



Octopus cake made by Frankie, daughter Rebecca Harris, granddaughter Ava Winstanley Harris, and Zoë Meager. (Photo courtesy of Scorpio Books)

I was surprised and delighted when Frankie and CUP asked me to launch Frankie's new collection. Until today, I had only met – and greatly admired – Frankie through her stories, so it's such a pleasure to finally meet her in person today, and to be part of welcoming her Octopus into the world.

DESIGN

Before we talk about the content of the book, I'd like to take a moment to judge this book by its cover, and its internal design, and its whole aesthetic. I hadn't held this book in my hand until today, and I can't stop touching it – revelling in the delight of a book made beautifully. *The Father of Octopus Wrestling* is described as "an artisan production", designed and printed by Ilam Press, Ilam School of Fine Arts. And it shows.

The cover is glorious, of course. Purple and gold – royal colours, rich colours – signal that this is a treasure. There's just a suggestion (forcing you to look harder, inviting you in) of tentacles to link with the title. The typography, the lettering – feels Victorian or Edwardian, from a century or more ago, and this is carried through to the section titles – like visiting cards on a drawing room mantelpiece, or title slides on a silent film, or on display at the side of a vaudeville stage, or a circus.

There's a lovely tension between the vintage design elements and the design of the text within. There's a clean, modern, online publishing aesthetic in details like the little ellipsis at bottom right of the page when a story continues overleaf; the position of the page numbers. Paragraphs are aligned left, with a line space between – a layout/design more often used online. The line spaces between paragraphs also foreground the sense of poetry – they're not so much paragraphs as stanzas.

Perhaps most importantly, and most pleasing, though: space has been left in which these stories can breathe and rest and move and be. There's such generosity in affording the stories that space, and I applaud CUP and Ilam Press for this, and the whole design of the book.

TITLES, SECTIONS, WORKING TOGETHER

This collection is made up of small fictions. Micro fiction, flash fiction, short short stories – most of them are contained within a single page, and only one is longer than two pages.

The first thing that struck me is the richness and weirdness of the titles. I love a good title. Titles – like signs outside a circus or sideshow tent – draw us in, they tease us and entice us. They situate us; they set up our expectations – perhaps to be met, perhaps to be subverted. Frankie's book has the best story titles, and the best section titles, I've encountered in possibly forever (or since Frankie's last collection).

Each of the six sections within this collection is itself a tiny collection. I read them with wonder, to discover what collects and connects the stories within each section; and I marvelled at the careful links and segues – sometimes clever, sometimes funny, sometimes sad, sometimes all of these – between stories, and from one section to the next.

Something about the section titles and the stories within them makes me think of puzzles or riddles. The story groupings feel like a riddle or puzzle that Frankie has set us, her readers. To be solved, or simply to delight us. In this I think that, like some of the humans and other creatures that populate her stories, Frankie's a bit of a trickster, a shapeshifter.

Deciphering those puzzles, tracking those connections, the recurring items and motifs and threads, is a real delight for readers of this collection, and one that will keep you coming back to its stories, again and again. These repeating, recurring elements: eggs and orbs and ripening and pregnancies; hair; zookeepers, keepers of creatures, keepers and carers of humans. And many many more.

And this leads to one of the greatest delights of this collection. Each story is its own thing. But added to that, overlaying that, are the ways that stories combine and nudge up against each other to *expand*. There's something in the ways that stories within a section combine, and then the ways that sections combine, in seemingly infinite combinations. Infinite expansion, until the whole is very very much bigger than the sum of its already remarkable parts.

LANGUAGE

I can't talk about this book without talking about language. There's a sense of these stories as poetry. There's a thin line (or perhaps no line at all?) between flash fiction and poetry, and the rich language use and space on the page of these stories makes many of them readable as poems, as much as stories. There's a sense of *performability*, or *read-out-loud-ability* – these are stories that ache and cry to be read aloud, to be spoken, to be performed. Stories – these stories – are for telling, and for speaking, and for walking about on the stage (and Frankie's background in theatre is at play here, I'm sure), and for walking about out in the world. These stories are also for the page (but not *only* for the page).

There's so much play, and playfulness, in these stories. But there's *sadness* and darkness underneath. There's particular darkness/sadness of/about others (fathers, sisters, husbands, babies) – so it's observed, or narrated, and beautifully so, with the lightest, surest touch.

And where there's playfulness, and darkness, there's often also a sense that is unsettling or disturbing. Sometimes that sense of the unsettling arises from the expectation of the title and the first line or so being undercut, ripped out from under you (in the story 'Babushkas', for example). These stories travel a very long distance in a very short space of time and page.

THE PEOPLE

He tangata he tangata he tangata – people (characters) are front and centre in this book. Fathers; mothers; the eponymous father of octopus wrestling. Madame Curie. Anne Frank.

There are characters – Miss Nebraska, for instance – who reappear in stories across the collection. These reappearing characters make the experience of reading this book a little like living in a small town, and bumping into people regularly, finding out a little more about them each time – and wanting to know more.

STORY

I'd like to finish as the collection finishes, with its last story, 'The story inside her', and the idea that story itself is an entity, a character to be kept safe, or to be rescued from harm; that story is to be nurtured:

'There is a story inside her ...'

Story comes from within, but story 'has its own ideas' – story has agency beyond its creator.

Congratulations Frankie, Catherine and all at Canterbury University Press, and Ilam Press, as we launch your beautiful Octopus into the world.

Tracy Farr
August 2019



Frankie about to cut the cake
(Photos courtesy of Scorpio Books)



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