

I Just Stepped Out - review, September 2015

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Before I read Felix Dennis' tenth collection, I remembered one particular audience. It was a paying audience, consisting largely of young men, seated at tables, noisily eating and drinking. None of them had ever been seen at a poetry event in that town. Felix Dennis, performing his own poems from memory, silenced, amused and moved them. This was no small thing. *I Just Stepped Out* is dedicated to 'the Muse who came late'. Publication of this book came after Dennis' own death from cancer. His absorbing introduction refers both to sex and, at greater length, his planting of a forest. The book's first section draws together earlier poems. The best have a rueful, song-like quality:

*Try not to forget
To pluck all the cherries
Chance will allow,
Take them and welcome –
I'm done with them now.*

(*I Plucked All the Cherries*)

There is no veil between Dennis' best lines and the world, past or present, as in his account of Victorian London, 'its roads awash with shit and snow'. His terseness still touches the pulse of the daily news: 'The test is who we save.'

Dennis' unashamed directness and jaunty rhymes are not to everyone's taste. 'Take them and welcome'. I have always felt welcomed by Dennis' work. He had his own style of producing books, with lavish footnotes. I think many readers unused to poetry would find these engrossing (as I do). Can Victorian diction smother his lines? Are his rhythms sometimes too slick? Yes. But his references to popular poets of the early twentieth century, such as Kipling and Henley, are thought-provoking. So is his statement: 'The post-World War II generation in the West (especially men) found it difficult to express their feelings'. I grew up in that silence. I agree. Remembering the enthralled (and relieved) faces of the young men who reacted so warmly to his poetry, I think that Dennis' comment remains true – especially of men. Poems as clear and unashamedly emotional as those of Felix Dennis keep a special value in British culture.

'What do we owe the dead [...]?' Dennis' reflections on his final bouts of illness are compelling: 'My next thought was: I have so little time'. 'There are no second acts except in plays.' 'I am writing two letters I know I'll destroy.' The references to anxieties about business, 'that debt/ will sink our fledgling start-up', are intriguing, and too rare in poetry.

But a dying millionaire has other concerns: 'I have given my dog to a friend'. Dennis' poems are equally passionate about animals and trees: 'ash and oak/ And poplar'. I think this admirable, and a major reason why his poems engaged his audiences. His last work catches, memorably, the pathos of a very rich man amongst his useless possessions, the 'books I own but now shall never read'. The word that echoes, through poem after poem, is 'alone'.

Felix Dennis' poems never lose his enthusiasm for 'Life's mess'. Dennis claims to have overcome many addictions, and I believe him. But I find it hard to believe anyone would ever have weaned him off capital letters. And I still remember with amused approval his declaration that he a) had made his bank sponsor his current poetry tour and b) would spend all its profits on planting more trees.