# **Laureate’s Jubilee**

**An anthology edited by poet laureate Carol Ann Duffy recalls each year of the Queen’s reign**

 

**Jubilee Lines, edited by Carol Ann Duffy, *Faber, RRP£12.99, 134 pages***

Most of the poets in Carol Ann Duffy’s entertaining new anthology, *Jubilee Lines*, seem uncannily good at remembering events that happened in the year they pick out to celebrate. Or perhaps they are being canny, and a new factor has entered the poetic memory: Google. In the Poet Laureate’s introduction to the book, there is a sentence that threatens to give it all away. “Imtiaz Dharker, dancing in Glasgow to the Bee Gees, reminds us that Steve Biko, Groucho Marx, Robert Lowell and Elvis all died in 1977 by which time the Queen had been on the throne for nearly a quarter of a century.” Yes, but perhaps a machine reminded her.

And yet when you think about it, why not? The worst the machine can do is to remind the poet what his ideal array of memories ought to have been. In her poem about 1963, “World Treats”, Ruth Fainlight comes clean:

*Nineteen sixty three: Kennedy is*
*assassinated, The Beatles release their first*
*album, and Valentina Tereshkova*
*floats weightless against a fair radiation*
*from the final remnants of the Big Bang –*
*the first woman in space.*

She goes on to mention the mechanism that made such a feat of recall possible:

*I had to Google ‘world events’ for that year,*
*but there was no problem remembering*
*what I’d been doing.*
*We travelled back from Morocco, because*
*Alan was invited to Russia, and now that Ted*
*had left her, Sylvia and I planned to spend*
*that month together in North Tawton [ ... ]*

Somewhere about there, I started wishing that the rush of gush was more like a properly distilled poem and less like an easily sprawling literary reminiscence. But one wouldn’t want to apply that as a general rule. There has to be someone to say what it was like to be young enough for Germaine Greer to liberate you. Liz Lochhead, in her poem about 1966, registers the heady transition from reading magazines such as Honey and Petticoat to reading *The Female Eunuch*. What a thrill it must have been, to open a proper book with long words in it and find them speaking to your secret needs! (“*Hey girl, did it feel strange/ To be waiting for the a-changing times to change*?”) These feelings are valuable in themselves and it is good to see them shuffled into place with reasonable tightness by poets otherwise not remarkable for their powers of compression.

Duffy, of course, is remarkable for that very thing, and she has made sure there are plenty of poets present around the edge of this loosely arranged bran-tub who know how to pack things close. Among the established names are Dannie Abse, Fleur Adcock, Ian Duhig, Douglas Dunn, David Harsent, Geoffrey Hill, Michael Longley, Don Paterson, Christopher Reid, Hugo Williams, and so on in alphabetical order.

This is a high quality carnival, with Robin Roberston’s “The Halving” putting in a good claim for the title of star turn. It’s a poem about being operated on under general anaesthetic, and perhaps if I hadn’t been undergoing a bit of that myself lately I would have hurried on by; but no, Robertson’s language is too vivid to ignore.

*General anaesthesia: a median sternotomy*
*achieved by sternal saw; the ribs*
*held aghast by retractor [ ... ]*

That placement of the word “aghast” is right out of a whole European tradition of the painter at the anatomy school. I had not thought to find anything quite so cutting – if that’s the word we’re looking for – in a book that, at first sight, might look like a toy, one of those little anthologies put together for Queen Mary’s dolls’ house back there in the long ago.

But, of course, the beginning of the current Queen’s reign is long ago now for most of us. Duffy’s sensitivity to time, and to the times she lives in: what a blessing it has already been. I could go on quoting from her party list of invitees indefinitely. Nobody present is ever less than disarming. But let’s remind ourselves that the chief reason why she is such a gifted editor is that she is such a gifted poet: she has a nose for the stuff.

A poem by her closes the book and rounds it out, because the year is 2012: now. The place? The Thames.

*My salmon fed apprentices*
*Until I choked on sewage: my foul breath*
*shut Parliament [ ... ]*

And try this:

*Always bells [ ... ] in my tamed tides, deep.*

Such textures take you back in a loop to her first line. “*History as water, I lie back, remember it all*.”

Somehow, with her, one gets the sense that Google is not in play. All her memories are internalised, like those of the Thames. Her gifts as an anthologist are a chastening reminder that there is a modern tradition of poets who were genuinely and generously interested in the young poets coming up. Eliot was a conspicuous example. Ideally it should be part of the job description. We owe it to Andrew Motion that he made getting out there and pushing poetry in schools part of the job description of the laureateship, and Carol Ann Duffy is continuing that large-hearted approach in the most startling way. I recommend scoring a few extra copies of this fine jubilee album for Christmas presents.

--*Financial Times*, April 28, 2012