
*The Welfare of My Enemy* is a sustained work on darkness and loss that revolves around different meanings of the term ‘missing person’. It is not only about those who become lost, but also about family and friends who are left behind to continue living with the absence and often an unresolved mystery.

None of the poems is titled. With the exception of two poems, one being the first, all are presented in rhyming couplets that are enjambed, that is, which flow to the following line rather than being syntactically contained. Occasionally, the effect is intrusive and there is the odd wrenched rhyme but reading for the voice rather than the page lessens the occasional sense of dislocation or contrivance. Once the reader is tuned in to a more fluid reading approach, the sense of the narrating character emerges more readily.

That element of narration is important for this collection. The range of characters is wide, at one extreme embracing the unsuspecting and/or vulnerable and at the other the cruel and vicious. It is to Lawrence’s credit that within each of these, there is a subtle shading that allows the reader to discern difference. Not all villains are the same, nor all victims. In less capable hands, they could have become blurred.

There is no continuous narrative but rather a series of poems that each act like momentary openings to light a situation of vulnerability, loss, grief, or despondency leading a person to become missing in one sense or another – if they are not already so. That distancing and disruption may relate to their own feelings of low esteem or loss of hope, perhaps from a relationship breakdown or mental collapse, or to having suffered at the hands of a violent predator.

The overall effect is not, as one might fear, ghoulisch, although it is certainly chilling at times. Many of the poems speak to the idea of our tenuous hold on life, as in these lines (11):

> … Everyone knows  
> How lightly we are here, and how easily we go  
> From spark to smoke in a shuffling of years.  
> Abandonment or being lost are among the fears  
> We truly dread, and children affect us most.

Lawrence can produce a stark and appropriate image too, describing a night scene where ‘A single light burns / over the white, overlooking stitches that divide the road’ (13), and the earth itself as an animal in the permanent symbiotic meshing of life and death (15):

> … a world  
> of abundant flowering, where even sunlight  
> filtered and diffuse, is redolent of wet  
> ash and the presence of animals, and birds –  
> and here, under a thin pelt of earth, the blood …
After a number of contemplative poems, and just when more bite was needed, we encounter the mind of a sociopath with a jolt: ‘You won’t find my job description / in the weekend classifieds. I’m a sole trader’ (17). The narration shifts just as suddenly to the viewpoint of a hunting dog, which is virtually as intense in its focus as it tracks a criminal (19), and then to that of a detective who has learnt of a missing couple (20). These shifting perspectives are at the heart of the collection, allowing the reader to dip into states of fear, indifference, defiance, grief, and so on, as they arise with each character. Most are accomplished depictions, although a passage from page 34 does not ring true due to over-formality, and there is an awkward transition between conversational and a more poetic inner voice in another at page 44.

The intensity of a fierce dance through a manic episode is beautifully laid out from page 47:

Medication is one option, but so is a punch or hot wire
to the right hemisphere of your dream-
acquired brain injury. Best to set fire to the scene

The publisher’s blurb tells us that Lawrence wrote this sometimes disturbing book after two friends went missing in 1978. Ultimately, it was finalised as part of a creative writing doctorate and whether read as a novella of mixed voices or as a poetry collection on a theme, it provides compelling reading.

**Steve Evans**