

Overcooked

Squid Squad. A Novel, Matthew Welton (104pp, Carcanet)

This is the second Matthew Welton book I've read. Perhaps wisely I passed the first on to another Stride reviewer for their comments, which were much warmer than mine would have been. I have very similar reactions to *Squid Squad* as I did to *The Number Poems*: I want to like it, but it's just so facile.

The trouble is that it's presented as experimental, and it's not. It's comes across mostly as a pastiche of experiment and other poetry (and prose poetry). The 'novel' of the title consists of 64 prose poems, each with four paragraphs, all typeset narrowly onto the page. Each poem has three paragraphs about somebody doing something, followed by a fourth paragraph about the weather. Nice idea, but it's simply boring.

The second part of the book contains individual poems, many of which are tributes to poets whose work they satire or pastiche, with many others written using restraints (e.g. 'Five Pieces, each of 250 words' or the A-Z of 'Awesome'). Unfortunately, the scaffolding of the poems (the restraints or structure) are foregrounded as though they are intrinsically interesting; they're not, and neither are most of the poems. There are gentle puns about which birds can be seen where (the 'drake' in Plymouth – Drake's Island, geddit?), a running joke about lemons (which I don't get at all), and several list poems about who or what the dedicatee of the poem isn't, often using their initials to inform this.

I simply want more. Processes, forms and restraints are great, but they need to be used and subverted, they are only a means to an end. Here, they seem to be the point of most of this work, and it's not enough. I don't want to know how the author engages with their writing, how they make things, I want the words and end result to hold my attention regardless. There's something terribly uptight and restrained about all this, mannered even. Poetry deserves more, as do its readers.

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