

Twists and Turns

How the Light Changes, Steve Spence (95pp, Shearsman)

Like myself, Steve Spence did a creative writing MA at Plymouth University. I suspect he may have had the same kind of experience that I did (a few years earlier) with regard to how language and poetry works or might work: an experience that unsettled me and changed how I wrote, giving me new tools, processes and critical understanding I could build on.

These tools include collage, which Steve Spence has made full use of over the course of several books. He learnt very early on to control his collage and choose what to put in to the mix he uses to write his poems, so they could thematically link together with a kind of local intertextuality that allowed poems to work both individually and as a collection. His first book used pirates and Lewis Carroll's Alice to surreal and engaging effect, and he has steadily built further collections in a similar manner.

I'm a big fan of Spence's work, but I have been waiting for the work to evolve and move on. Too many of his poems over the years have been three-line stanzas that ended with a question; however brilliant the poems were (and they often were) his work was starting to seem formulaic, so it's good to see *How the Light Changes* offering readers a variety of poetic shapes and some different ways of assembling text.

There are skinny long staccato poems here, as well as other poems that sit heavily on the page as big dark blocks of long-lined stanzas. The clever wit and careful juxtaposition remain however, with parataxis and unlikely poetic zigzags and semantic diversions on every page. As he says, in 'Reading the Water',

it could
that plagiarism
is a key intellectual
device

although I don't think remix or collage *is* plagiarism, just the way we currently recognise how we make things – including poems – from what is already around us. This immersion in – for want of another world – culture, in the form of news, arts, social media, books and life itself, makes Spence's poetry welcoming as well as disturbing: despite the alarming contrasts, twists and turns, strange synchronicities and verbal jokes, in the end, as it says at the start of the book,

Everything
here
seems strangely
familiar.
(*'She Breathes Unsteadily'*)

This is both comforting and unsettling. What a crazy world we live in, but thank goodness for authors like Steve Spence who we can rely on to make (non)sense out of it.

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