

*Revolutionary Letters*, Diana Di Prima (191pp, £13.99, Silver Press)

This new U.K. edition of *Revolutionary Letters* gathers up fifty years of Di Prima's anarchic and insightful series of poems which she started writing back in 1968. Moving to New York City in the 1950s she embedded herself in the alternative culture of the Beatniks in Greenwich Village before embracing the Black Panther movement, drugs, feminism, counterculture politics, direct action, and what we now call small press publishing.

The book contains freeform rants, comments upon topical events, advice to friends and/or would-be revolutionaries, lists, cynicism, utopian ideologues and utopian dreams. Somewhat surprisingly, alongside the down-to-earth survival techniques she shares there is also the presence of the spiritual weaving through her work alongside questioning insight:

You cannot write a single line w/ out a cosmology  
a cosmogony  
laid out, before all eyes

[...]

There is no way out of the spiritual battle  
the war is the war against the imagination  
you can't sign up as a conscientious objector.  
(*'Revolutionary Letter #75'*)

As soon as we submit  
to a system based on causality, linear time  
we submit, again, to the old values, plunge again  
into slavery.  
(*'Revolutionary Letter #51'*)

At other times, however, she is jubilantly optimistic and proclamative:

I will not rest  
till we walk free & fearless on the earth  
each doing in the manner of his blood  
& tribe, peaceful in the free air  
(*'Revolutionary Letter #20'*)

Other poems offer dialogue with other poets – be they famous or unknown, or immediate responses to local (the NYC police clearing Tompkins Park of the homeless, her neighbours' need for money or food) and international events such as 9/11, The Gulf War, or The Occupy movement:

Occupy the planet  
the Oceans  
as well

as the Land

Mind is unlimited  
Can go anywhere

Occupy the Night Sky,  
Mother Nuit

Occupy your breath  
Your Body & remember  
We are one Body

Occupy with Love  
( 'Revolutionary Letter #108' )

I like the fact Di Prima is often angry, sometimes anti-technology ('did you ever try to email chicken soup?') informative and instructive, and that her work includes both elation and despair. She cuts through the crap of political rhetoric, points out what is actually important in society – be that local or international, and reminds us that we can change the world as individuals, starting with where we live, how we live and who we live with or next to. It's easy to be cynical about poems as a container of comment or narrative, let alone as a catalyst for revolution, but it's also good to be reminded that words do affect us and can inspire, effect and facilitate change.

Di Prima's work, like that of Adrian Mitchell, Kenneth Patchen and Julian Beck, can often be labelled simplistic and obvious, naive and unnuanced, but as I numbly watch the bombs fall on Ukraine and wonder what on earth I can do, it's good to be reminded as a writer that poetry can matter:

What matters:  
                  the memory  
of the poem  
                  taking root in  
thousands  
                  of minds...  
( 'Revolutionary Letter #110' )

Rupert Loydell