

This Is Not Your Final Form: Poems About Birmingham

Edited by Richard O'Brien & Emma Wright: The Emma Press, 2017

Second to None

From the industrial revolution to intimate family histories, public and private stories combine in this new book of poems celebrating Birmingham. It is an ambitious project attempting to capture the humour and humanity of this dynamic and open-minded 'city of a thousand tongues' (Beorma by Gregory Leadbetter).

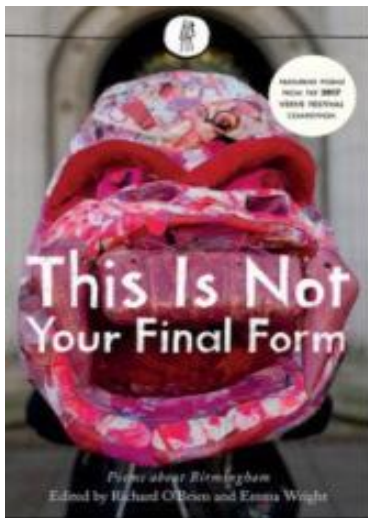
'This is not a city.

This is a cloudburst of culture –

and we are not citizens,

we are soaked to the bone.'

More canals than Venice! By Kibriya Mehrban



The UK's second city has a genuinely inclusive, refreshingly unpretentious and truly exceptional creative scene. *This Is Not Your Final Form* is the much-anticipated anthology of entries to Birmingham's inaugural Verve Festival of Poetry and Spoken Word which took place earlier this year. As a Brummie based in London, I was very excited to read it.

Heather Freckleton's 'In the Bullring: After image of my Parents' brought me back to weekends spent scouring the rag markets for dress-making material with my Mom and buying 'greasy newspapers full of chips' for lunch. Shaun Hands' Birmingham: An Odyssey in 21 Images made me laugh out loud with references to Daysaver bus tickets and the old Brutalist architecture. His witty blend of admiration, nostalgia and disgust flawlessly contrasts the modern with the old image of the city.

Washday by Bernadette Lynch captures the unpredictability of working class wartime life. In this vibrant snapshot of the past, a mundane afternoon is made extraordinary by the dramatic return of a soldier. It is a beautifully detailed study of how challenging times fostered the resilience of local people facing adversity.

'Our Dawn scrubbed her knuckles raw on the washboard, cleansing Europe of Hitler.'

Of the four prize-winning entries, the melancholy prose poem *The Second Law of Thermodynamics* by Susannah Dickey particularly resonates. Taking a visitor on a tour of the centre, it tackles the subject of loneliness and the desire for intimacy. Birmingham's art deco Electric Cinema, the oldest working cinema in the UK, forms the backdrop to an unsuccessful date, with a nod to its seedier past as the narrator attempts to make a connection amidst the clamour of the city.

Memories of growing up are intricately woven into Reza Arabpour's ingenious *Another Day in a Brummie Life*. Local and international communities combine, emphasizing the city's multicultural heart. It focuses on the human face of Birmingham as well as the hidden beauty behind the concrete façades.

*'I picked up a gab's worth
of Baba's Mama's tongue –
the Persian version –
in Handsworth above my Amoo's shop
among the varieties of life making roots
from distant time zones.'*

Another Day in a Brummie Life by Reza Arabpour

The incredibly catchy 'Who Put Bella in the Wych Elm Tree?' by Helen Rehman is based on a real-life local murder case. During the Second World War, a woman's body was found hidden inside a tree in the woods. The mystery has never been solved and the poem artfully incorporates the various local conspiracy theories surrounding the story. This rhythmic plain spoken lyrical poem reads like a sinister children's playground chant and stayed with me for days.

*'Birmingham has bloomed since 1943,
from the Bullring to John Lewis to the Library –
we have theatres, universities, a symphony,
but we still can't name the woman in the wych elm tree.'*

This Is Not Your Final Form is a compact read but one befitting multiple revisits to uncover the poems' many layers. It made me laugh and cry and even had me wondering why I have never wondered what the Floozie in the Jacuzzi* dreams about at night. Many different voices and poetic styles are featured as talented poets of all ages and backgrounds reflect the diversity which to me is one of the city's greatest strengths.

A real pick and mix of styles and rhythms, the poems channel the city's depths and look (for the most part) beyond the obvious clichés. The city's distinctive self-deprecating humour and outlook fill the pages of this funny, bleak, uplifting, tragic, original, gritty and inspirational love letter to Birmingham.

'As long as kids are throwing shopping trolleys into rivers/There'll always be a Birmingham.'
Birmingham: An Odyssey in 21 Images by Shaun Hands

*The statue of a naked woman in a fountain in Victoria Square. This is not her real name, it's how she is known locally. I had to Google it to find out the correct title. It is really called The River, according to Wikipedia.

About the publisher

The Emma Press is an award-winning independent publisher based in Birmingham. Founded by Emma Wright in 2012, it is 'dedicated to producing beautiful, thought-provoking books' and aims to make poetry more accessible. They are keen to discover new writers and have regular themed poetry competitions.

About the Reviewer

Becky Danks is an avid reader, creative writer, dog lover, occasional poet, and book reviewer. Amongst other things! Her own poem was shortlisted for the Verve Festival poetry competition 2017. Read her magazine feature on the Verve Festival [here](#). Twitter: @BeckyD123. Website: www.beckydanks.com