

Review K Angel
Pelmanism Dilys Rose

Pelmanism is a novel about memory. Moving from an opening in the present, with Gala returning to visit her elderly parents, to her childhood in 1960s Glasgow, it draws attention to the work of memory-making. The act of constructing a narrative about a life is a reconstruction amidst lapses and uncertainties. Making memories – and retaining them – is hard work.

Rose is a poet as well as a novelist and short-story writer, and her gifts of precision punctuate the story: 'Birds going home to roost passed the window, quick as blinks'; 'the fat, furry question mark of a squirrel'. Her skills in building a portrait are brought to bear most strongly on the figure of Gala's father. Miles Price's desperate, doomed attempts to amount to something, to fulfill his ever-shifting artistic ambitions and be admired by his community, are the soil for subtle cruelties towards his family. His self-mythologisation admits no other possible rival, including his own gifted daughter. Rose paints a quietly agonizing portrait of a family tyrannized by an unhappy male ego; 'the family trundled after their leader.' This ego is as narcissistic as it is remote; I thought more than once of Mr Ramsey in *To The Lighthouse*. Miles is a man happy to slowly, if unintentionally, impale his family on his own sufferings.

Gala's grandmother – warm, supportive, doing her admirable best to encourage her grandchildren in a suffocating family home – is drawn with great tenderness. Rose's evocations of her and her friends are also shrewd observations of the particular circumstances of women of this generation: they 'had lived through the first and second war with Germany; frugality seasoned with a dash of recklessness was in their blood'. They were 'old ladies who knew their place, counted their blessings, made the best of things with their tinkling, silvery laughter'.

Pelmanism subtly traces changing expectations of gender in the postwar period. Miles is a man driven by a feeling of persecuted masculinity – a feeling entangled with a rhetoric of wartime sacrifice rewarded only with a pusillanimous counterculture. Gala's grandmother feels grateful for being embraced in her widowhood, and has low expectations of what she deserves. She is generous to the confused child Gala – who as an adult will grapple with her own ambivalence about ambition and about men.

Where Rose deftly evokes this landscape through characterization, she is powerful and moving; where she articulates it more explicitly, her prose loses some force. Her elegant surety wavers in some nods to the cultural climate of the sixties and seventies, where details can seem like clunky acts of signposting for the reader. A flatshare in Gala's post-university days features Rainbow Suzi and a jumble of fetish gear, baby stuff, 'dope doings and Genius Jake's ever-growing collection of fertility goddesses'. Along with a boyfriend, the 'cocky bastard who got what he wanted', these characters aren't given space to grow, and these passages can feel gestural – as do Miles's rantings against 'those free-thinking types...bandying about names like Martin Luther King'.

A poised control, however, characterizes much of the book, which unfolds in often visually arresting short scenes. Occasionally this rhythm becomes choppy, but in its finest moments, it captures the intermittent nature of memory itself. It lays bare the patchiness of time passing, and evokes the jerky flashes of insight that can characterize our understanding of our pasts.

The epigraph to the novel is a 'Homage to RD Laing', a poem by Rose herself. This moving novel is quietly animated by a very Laingian insight into the madness and misery that the tyranny of family itself can bring about. 'Dad', after all, 'must not, for any reason, be upset.'