

Mandrake Petals and Scattered Feathers Review

Mandrake Petals and Scattered Feathers is the second title from David Greygoose, and, like his first novel, (Brunt Boggart: A Tapestry of Tales) Greygoose succeeds at transporting readers into ambiguously medieval folk tales through lyrical prose and an atmospheric conveyance of lost love.

Whilst Mandrake Petals begins as a seemingly disconnected collection of fairy stories, (emphasis on the more traditional idea of the fairy here) the overarching journey quickly becomes apparent, with a diverse atlas of characters consistently giving way to strange yet familiar names. The standouts among these are Pickapple, Elmskin and Rimmony, with Elmskin's odyssey to find Rimmony, whom he used to watch in the forest, providing the strongest cohesive narrative. Pickapple, whom we return to on a delightfully regular basis, often serves as a palette cleanser. Between the longer stories that range from the bizarrely sorrowful to the disturbingly macabre, we gratefully find Pickapple, who's lighthearted pranks and genuinely clever wordplay are often just the mischief that is required after Greygoose's heavier, more thoughtful tales.

Accompanying stories of Elmskin's quest and Pickapple's trickery, Greygoose depicts a plethora of folkloric parables, from mermaids stowing away on sky-ships hoping to meet the sea, to Grimm inspired tales of maidens forcibly domesticated. No matter the particular story, Greygoose has an undeniably lyrical ear for prose. His flowing, often abstract descriptions and dialogue usually bely an intense sorrow and darkness, and more than a few of Greygoose's stories hint at a great sense of grief. Sometimes, this is a more traditional feeling, like the longing for a lost loved one. Other times, it is more implicit, like the grief for a future lost to past mistakes and rash decisions. Even the lighter tales are tinged with an intangible melancholy- melancholy for a world that feels so real in its fantastical design that reading is often accompanied by half awoken nostalgia. It's as if Greygoose is prompting us to remember an earth that never existed, but was, at one time, wonderfully and terrifyingly real to our ancestors around the campfire.

Indeed, one of the most oft repeated motifs in Mandrake Petals is the image of fireside warmth, of peoples great, small and wonderfully weird gathering together (for better or worse) to stave off the cold and the night in a domestic space. This image permeates through the telling, with Greygoose increasingly feeling like a wizened wanderer come to pass the evening with us beside the hearth. The language of Mandrake Petals is simple, never too complex or fanciful despite the often ambiguous and peculiar narrative, and this easy, almost meandering prose makes the novel frequently amenable to a reread/retelling. And with the otherworldly descriptions of the mundane, Greygoose manages to evoke a sense of the familiar, but not quite- of an almost medieval setting laden with the preternatural, and of practises far older than any period in the dark ages. Ancient rituals, prophecy and symbolic transformations litter most of the stories in Mandrake Petals, yet never without a strong grounding to the intrinsically human. Despite the supernatural pretensions, the conflicts that arise are mostly domestic and familial: mothers arguing with daughters, sons leaving home, wives losing husbands. Like the great myths from around the world, Greygoose manages to use the fantastical to present and explain ourselves and each other, with the musical syntax and descriptions of untamed nature lending a completely timeless feel, as if Greygoose merely stumbled onto these ancient texts carved into the bones of an old tree, and decided to write them down.

If there is one detriment with this style, it is that the geography of the setting is a little too ambiguous at times. These stories range from the wildest thickets and witches' huts all the way to crashing seas and mountain peaks, and sometimes the scale is sadly, lost. This is especially prevalent in Elmskin's narrative, where the recurring story of a young man wandering the world in search of his lost friend is offset slightly by the fact that it is impossible to tell how far he has come, despite the numerous physical trials he endures. However, given this is more of an emotional odyssey, of a tale regarding both Elmskin and Rimmony's journey into maturity, the physical layout is of minor distinction to the plot. Contrasted with the timeless, almost mythological feel, the familiar yet lyrical prose and the host of unique and unknowable characters, Mandrake Petals and Scattered Feathers is a folklorish, abstract elegy that has the capacity to both disturb and delight in equal measure.