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Jackie Kay, *Trumpet* (1998)

Jackie Kay's award-winning novel *Trumpet* (1998) deservedly made the longlist in the public vote for Scotland's favourite book, perhaps because first and foremost it is not about what it takes to be Scottish, Scotland itself or anything national at all. Much more importantly, it deals with questions of identity that go beyond Scottishness and manages to unmask the emptiness of normative categories like gender, sexuality, 'race' and ethnic origins in a postmodern and postcolonial society. What still makes it a Scottish novel might be the fact that *Trumpet* mirrors the (autobiographical) awareness of being even more of an outsider in a country of self-perceived outsiders—be it due to “deviant” skin colour or gender performance.¹

When at his death the celebrated black jazz trumpeter Joss Moody is revealed to have been biologically female, his adopted son Colman and other characters have to come to terms with this disclosure.² Kay's narration engages multiple perspectives of people who were more or less acquainted with Joss and their individual reaction to the revelation of his biological femininity, for example, the funeral director who cannot cope with what he finds when he prepares the corpse for the embalmer, or the registrar who is unsure which box to tick on the death certificate. This is artfully achieved without ever focusing on Joss himself or giving him a voice up to the point when Colman is finally ready to face his father's farewell letter.

While his widow Millie's loving reminiscences of her husband reveal the extent of bigotry and racism in Scottish/British society that the couple had to face, other characters express their confusion, sensationalism or even sheer trans- and homophobia. Colman is finally confronted with his

¹ Parts of this contribution have been adapted from my discussion of *Trumpet* in *Scotland the Brave? Deconstructing Nationalism in Contemporary Scottish Novels* [Scottish Studies in Europe, vol. 1] (Trier: WVT, 2016), 191-194. Other sources influencing this discussion include: Isla Duncan, “Devices of Concealment and Revelation in Jackie Kay's *Trumpet*,” *Signatures*, 2 (2000): 51-62; Tracy Hargreaves, “The Power of the Ordinary Subversive in Jackie Kay's *Trumpet*,” *Feminist Review*, 74 (2003): 2-16; Irene Rose, “Heralding New Possibilities: Female Masculinity in Jackie Kay's *Trumpet*,” in Daniel Lea and Berthold Schoene, eds. *Posting the Male: Masculinities in Post-war and Contemporary British Literature*. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), 141-58.

² The plot is inspired by the life of the anatomically female Billy Tipton, who lived as a man for fifty years for the sake of his career in the US jazz scene of the 1950s.

father's biological sex when he comes to see him one last time at the morgue. He is troubled by his impression of being betrayed by both his parents and his late father's transgender identity itself. Yet, Joss's resistance to any essentialist categorisation, be it in terms of gender or race, has always distressed his son. In one of his memories, Colman—himself a Black Scot like his father—remembers asking Joss about his origins in order to tackle his own perceived “Otherness” in a predominantly white Glasgow. But what he gets is a couple of alternative, fictional stories from which his father encourages him to “pick the one you like best and that one is true” (*Trumpet* 58-59). In the light of the revelation of Joss's covert transgender identity, Colman is initially quite unforgiving about his father's evasiveness until he changes his mind towards the end and manages to appreciate his father simply as the loving person he was, regardless of his biological sex and the network of secrets he wove around it.

It is mainly through the voice of tabloid journalist Sophie Stone's work that the reader is potentially confronted with his or her own curiosity in trans-peoples' biographies as we are used to learn about in mainstream media coverage. To those who did not know him personally, Joss's “fake” masculinity becomes abject in the public eye. Sophie insists on making his gender ambiguity explicit by always referring to Joss as “him/her” in interviews and drafts, thereby revealing that apart from his deviance from gender norms, there is not much to report about him at all, as ironically, he lived the ordinary life of a decent family man. She scents a scoop and is positive that “they should have no problems selling the book. People are interested in weirdos, sex changes, all that stuff” (*Trumpet* 125).

Jackie Kay manages to present an alternative construction of masculinity to the stereotypical Scottish “hard man” that has become somewhat worn out in genres like tartan noir or some realist fiction focusing on working-class and hard-drinking ultra-males, football hooligans, criminals, coal miners, wife beaters, hard-boiled detectives, or drug addicts. Joss's female masculinity is only sustained through his performative aspects while he is still alive—being a husband and father, through his name, and his ingenious trumpeting in his all-male jazz band. After his death, he is interpellated back into his “proper” femininity by the heteronormative and binary sex-gender discourse in the form of official paperwork or the media. However, through the memories of those characters that were close to Joss, Jackie Kay manages to expose the constructedness of any sexual role in what is a highly absorbing read written by a worthy new Scots Makar.

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