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Manfred Malzahn
United Arab Emirates University

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Writing on the Margins: Luke Sutherland, *Venus as a Boy* (2004)

There is an interesting similarity between the BBC's recent ranking of Scottish novels and the recent Iranian election: in both, the popular vote operated on a range of candidates determined by an assembly of experts. One may also be tempted to say that in both, the number one choice turned out to be a moderate with a high consensus factor, and a clear lead over any more controversial or polarising alternatives.

To the BBC's panel of judges, one such alternative that was presumably on the radar but eventually remained beyond the pale is Luke Sutherland's 2004 *Venus as a Boy*, a novel whose central character grows up as a boy in Orkney, discovers a Midas-like gift for giving epiphanic sexual experiences to female and male lovers alike, and dies as a woman in Soho.

I myself would have considered this book a strong contender for the Top Ten, and an almost mandatory selection for the Top Thirty that were presented to the public. Its rave reviews ring true even after a blurboskeptic reading: and since there seems as little point in repeating the praise that has been meted out as there is room for adding to it, I shall instead ponder three possible reasons for its non-inclusion.

To begin with, there is the issue of size and scale: the canvas, and what is represented on it. *Venus as a Boy* is a short novel, neither ten years in the making, nor thematically expansive. Its condensed narrative suggests comparisons with other literary gems crafted and subsequently ignored in Scotland: Neil Paterson's 1948 *The China Run*, for instance, which Somerset Maugham then picked as his book of the year for the *New York Times*; or Tom Hanlin's 1945 *Once in Every Lifetime*, which sold a quarter of a million copies within weeks of its publication.

Secondly, there is the issue of representativeness: for many, an essential quality of fictional realism that complements its verisimilitude. *Venus as a Boy* is bound to be perceived as peripheral from a Scottish mainland and mainstream perspective, with its focus on Orkney and on the fuzzy margins of sexual and racial identity. At the same time, though, it suggests that neither the default nor the deviant types of South Ronaldsay are so very different from those of Kinraddie or Leith.

Thirdly, there is the issue of acceptability, including the suitability of a book for Scottish Qualifications Certificate (SQC) syllabi. *Venus as a Boy* is not a likely chart topper for schools, and would hence make a very odd

one for the entire nation, however inured to explicit language and descriptions of unpleasant scenes and actions. That those alone did not disqualify any book from consideration for the Top Ten is evident: see for instance the ranking of *Trainspotting*. Likewise, recall certain passages in *Sunset Song* that deal with cruelty to humans and animals, or with a father's incestuous desire for his daughter.

So what is it about *Venus as a Boy* that kept it out? It "is rather critical of Orkney," as Ragnhild Ljosland put it in her column in *The Orcadian*, but she, too, acknowledged that the magic of the Orkney landscape illuminates the pages of a novel for which Michael Arditti in the *Independent* predicted many admirers, while adding "it is safe to say the Orkney Tourist Board will not be among them."

Those who wish to know more should go and read the book, and see how comfortable or uncomfortable they are in navigating the shifting frontier between masculine and feminine, real and fantastical, mundane and mythical, and ultimately, between right and wrong. They should moreover read Amy Liptrot's *The Outrun* (2016) as a non-fictional companion volume that has many of the strengths of Sutherland's narrative, and that may help reluctant or resistant readers of *Venus as a Boy* to see what the whole Orkney thing is all about.

Manfred Malzahn

United Arab Emirates University