



Needlework

Books Reviewed:

[Needlework](#) [1]

Issue:

[217](#) [2]

Reviewer:

[Geoff Fox](#) [3]

Editorial Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

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5

?Zeus was rotten. Turned in to a swan to rape a woman. I'd rather fuck a man than fuck a swan. Even non-consensually. I mean, a swan. You'd never see it coming.? Narrator Ces doesn?t mess about. The implicit contract with readers here ? you might infer ? is that they must make of the text whatever they can. No compromises of subject matter or vocabulary. No easy comedy, no helpful explanatory asides, for this is no slick-witted teenland where fun is never far away.

How could there be, given Ces?s experiences, as they are gradually revealed? Here, it?s not so much that stuff happens (which, in terms of events, it mostly doesn?t); more than enough stuff has already happened, shaping a relentless present demanding all of Ces?s resources if she is to survive. Her narrative ? which asks a lot of readers ? is one of those texts which extends a reader?s techniques; it is not linear, since it reflects the movements of a mind under constant pressure, darting sideways, backwards, forwards, making or not making connections or conventional sense. For Ces often thinks and writes (or maybe writes in order to think) through images, both visual and verbal. Perhaps a little like Sullivan?s countryman, James Joyce, in *Portrait of the Artist*, the form lies somewhere between poetry and prose. We don?t feel, as with so much YA fiction, that we are the confidantes of this first-person narrator; rather, we are overhearing a mind in free range reflection. If this seems to be a disordered mind, then Ces has much to be disordered about.

She is now 16. With her Mam, she has recently moved house, to make a new, safer start, it seems. Ces is the one who makes the greater effort to keep the place tidy, to get some food on the table, despite the pressures of a new school and her essential part-time job at the newsagents. She is guarded about entrusting herself to new friendships; even the sex she enjoys with college student Tom next door avoids intimacies beyond the physical. What we initially suspect and eventually are told is that her Mam?s been violently and habitually abused by her husband, leaving her resorting to bottle and bed for long periods. Understandably ? but still devastatingly ? Mam had little energy to notice, never mind intervene, as Ces?s Dad repeatedly abused and, from the age of 12, raped his daughter.

Why **Needlework**? Because Ces?s passion and, it seems, her path to escape and maybe restoration, is to become a highly-skilled tattoo artist. Interspersed with the reflective narrative are frequent italicised passages about the techniques, designs and significances of tattoos, coupled with Ces?s own ambitions; ?I would like to make things beautiful, but a tawdry and repulsive kind of beauty... Sexy pin-up zombies on a bicep. That sort of thing?. These sections feel as though they are charged with metaphor and psychological insights beyond Ces?s own understanding;

they may well be, but I confess they were often beyond mine too.

For the young reader who is ready for it, **Needlework** could very well be a landmark book - memorable, disturbing and moving. Others might, for the time being, be overwhelmed, more by form than subject matter.

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