



The Oldest Girl in the World; The Emperor's Watchmaker; Points of View with Professor Peekaboo

Books Reviewed:

[The Oldest Girl in the World](#) [1]

Books Reviewed:

[The Emperor's Watchmaker](#) [2]

Books Reviewed:

[Points of View with Professor Peekaboo](#) [3]

Issue:

[127](#) [4]

Reviewer:

[Robert Hull](#) [5]

Not on the list:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

3

It is very good news that Carol Ann Duffy is writing poems for children. But after **Meeting Midnight**, which was a cracking book, and a challenge, this new collection, perhaps following rather hard on the other's heels, is a bit of a let-down. It has some fine poems - 'A Crow and a Scarecrow', 'The Bridge of Toys', 'Halo', 'Vows', 'Fishcakes', 'The who?', 'How Emily Mercer (96) Grew Young', and others.

The strength of these poems - as of the earlier book - is in the drive of the narrative, the edgy syntax, the taut wit in the word-play and the rhyme. But too many others are working at a lower pressure, particularly where an idea or phrase is worked through a sequence of verses: as when 'a friend gave me' six things in the six verses. It makes for an 'easier' manner. Is that what's wanted? The rather more challenging and consistently better poet of **Meeting Midnight** was also recognisably the adult poet of **The World's Wife**. That was very exciting, and important. Just as it is important that Duffy keeps writing flat-out for children.

It is good news when Bloomsbury - or anyone - publishes someone's first collection of childrens' poetry. In Lemn Sissay's **The Emperor's Watchmaker** there are some real poems - such as 'The Emperor's Butterfly Maker', 'When I'm Older', and 'I'm Sorry I'm Sorry I'm Sorry'. And there are fine moments:

Every mother wants a baby / Like you / Every hiccup a comedy / Every fall a catastrophe.

But there are also a great number of words flying around not doing much, in poems where *cats curl cautiously in a corner*, and where a chip is a *salted sire of this sight of style*. I wince a bit being invited to feel welcome in *The wonderful world of wordy / Wicked wild worldly winding / wishful whizzing whacky words!* It is a pity, because this is a first collection and because there are poems, shorter poems, to be found and written up from what is hidden here, somewhere under the super-charged entertainer stance. My guide would be the genuine, quietly felt *I'm Sorry I'm Sorry I'm Sorry!*

- which reveals a voice not elsewhere.

Being a professor, Peek-aboo, in John Agard's **Points of View with Professor Peekaboo**, has thoughtful adult preoccupations about the environment, genes, the natural world, and so on:

*Green issues / are not to be treated lightly. / And quite rightly. / Or so Professor Peekaboo concluded / as he ponders
forests denuded / and fish in rivers oil-slick-doomed / and air all laden with fumes. / So from his bed, he made a leap /
and sat upon his compost heap.*

I am clear about the message but a bit lost with the rhyme and rhythm aspect. I try to get children to write things like *fatty chips* in preference to *chips fatty* (even though they've a rhyme planned on *scatty*), and *carpets starred with cat-sick* in preference to *carpets cat-sick-starred*. And I hope they rhyme *zoomed* with *groomed* or even *rheumed* - at least when it sounds like full-rhyme time in the rest of the poem. Is that pedantry? (And shouldn't it be *pondered*? Also, would it be rude or thick to ask why the professor makes this particular leap of imagination?) In sum, is there a poem here?

Questions like this crop up for me throughout the book, though not on every page, not in a nice pair of bathroom poems, or the fine poem about trees:

*They stand to attention / for the wind's inspection / They take orders from the sun / and also obey the rain / They salute
the skyline / and restle their green bayonets*

Does the poem need Peekaboo? Does the book as a whole? Do writers need so firmly theming?

Running Order:

29

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Links:

[1] <http://ww.booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/the-oldest-girl-in-the-world>

[2] <http://ww.booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/the-emperors-watchmaker>

[3] <http://ww.booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/points-of-view-with-professor-peekaboo>

[4] <http://ww.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/127>

[5] <http://ww.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/robert-hull>