



[Full Blood](#) by [John Siddique](#)

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Reviewed by [Denis Joe](#) July 2012

Full Blood is one of the most exciting collections of British poetry I've come across in the last few years. **John Siddique** stands apart from the much of the poetry scene in Britain that, with a few exceptions, seems to be dominated by crude confessionalism and even cruder moralism. Here Siddique presents us with poems that call on his life for inspiration. Whether about childhood or adulthood, Siddique's poems draw you into experiences rather than places in time.

The group of poems under the title **The Knife** are a case in point. The opening poem, **National Front** begins rather blandly:

*Their mouths full of fire and alcohol;
they patrol the town; night and weekends*

reminding me of an old song by the Jam. But this is no simplistic portrayal of a non-white young man growing up in a town in the Pennines. This is no sob story. We are invited to experience a scene in which each tiny detail carries meaning (*The eighteen holes of oxblood red/Dr. Martin Boots* [sic] . . .) Whilst the short line breaks provide a tension, with hard-sounding syllable endings seemingly emphasising action, this is not some caricature. The alliteration throughout the poem mixes violence with a recognition of humanity (humanity though, not at its best).

But Siddique doesn't attempt to portray an 'Us' and 'Them'. These are fellow human beings and the following two poems in the series are heartbreakingly beautiful in both the tenderness of the meaning and the sound of the words. The brevity of ***Andrea Or Julie*** works so well:

*Andrea on my left
I am full of desire
or was it Julie I
was walking to the bus,
both of them are written
in my inner pathways,
but time switches people
around when you try to
think of them.*

Whilst this is the only poem in this book that can stand as a statement (that it is one complete

sentence gives it a sense of urgency), it is far from the poseur-moralism of the likes of Carol Anne Duffy's [Guardian](#) poems, for instance, that want to tell us what we should understand. In this poem, Siddique seems to be signposting something of profound importance: the uncertainty of memory. This makes the third poem in this group ambiguous, in that we are led to believe that it was Julie that was the object of desire. *Andrea Or Julie* seems to have a functional role in that not only are we to doubt memory, but also we have to doubt what the poet is telling us.

This is reinforced by the closing lines from the third poem in the sequence, *Andrea*:

*Dear Andrea,
though I can't even remember what you
look like, the lightning spark
is still written there.*

In ***Rochdale Bus Station*** we are reminded of the central theme of memory in this section of poems (*It was modern then . . .*) and this seems reinforced by the alienation that runs through the poem. There is a great tension between closeness to a person and the distance from the environment (See you *she says as I unrequitedly watch*). That feeling of alienation is established in ***John Street***

with the threat of violence moving from imagined to real. Siddique does something very clever when he separates the threat from the person. Throughout there is an absence of physical description as such, Siddique separates 'them' from their actions (*It begins with a question*).

Full Blood is divided into four sections, each theme seemingly autobiographical presenting different stages and experiences in life. The poems headed **Circumnavigations** are written in a freestyle villanelle. Siddique maintains a tension throughout the seven poems, which are really one long poem. Each flow from and into each other. Reading them as one poem we seem to be taken on a journey full of contradictory turns, its theme of love and love-making capturing the falsehoods that we engage in, sometimes to please our 'other' and sometimes ourselves.

Siddique also displays a mastery of imagism. In **Gauntlets**, for instance:

*I caught the moon and turned it into a swastika
I caught the sun and turned its arms back to make
a swastika . . . □*

He paints an image as strong as Bashō or Issa or even the later Imagists such as Doolittle, as does the brief title poem. **Gauntlets** is as much an example of a confident mind as it is an example of what I would see as a sonnet. Other poems in this volume, such as *Green Dogs*

,
Between The Words
and
Bailero

, have the poet composing in 13, 14 and 15 lines and yet the volta is sufficiently well placed in each to make it hard to see the poems as anything other than sonnets.

The Afghan poems are captured in a present tense, although we know we cannot be talking

about the 'here and now':

*. . . The five-year old in me
can't remember the town's name.
[Afghanistan 1970, Stopped]*

And the flashback approach (similar to that in a movie where we are given the past in a present tense) is broken in **Kabul** by:

*. . . This is before
Russia, the Taliban or America close the books.*

What we find in this collection is a strong commitment to the art of poetry. Whilst it appears that Siddique is telling us his own story, he uses many voices to do so. This approach puts me in mind of the great American Objectivist poet Charles Reznikoff (1894 – 1976).

The basic tenets of Objectivist poetics as defined by Louis Zukofsky were to treat the poem as an object, and to emphasise sincerity, intelligence, and the poet's ability to look clearly at the world. Reznikoff's works drew on his own personal experiences, yet they went beyond mere autobiography. The 'sincerity' that Zukofsky spoke of should not be confused with the Romantic concept of 'truth', in which the artist was expected to present his version of truth about the world almost as beautified fact. The 'sincerity' of the Objectivists was a commitment to the poetry as an object, to be appreciated as a poem.

John Siddique fulfills this definition, though one gets the impression with each work that it does not want to stay in the same world, that it wishes to keep moving ahead: finding new expressions and new voices to convey the poetry to the world. **Full Blood** is an outstanding collection that displays all that is great and exciting about the art of poetry. John Siddique is disciplined without being distant, and intimate without being dogmatically self-referential. He stands as one of today's finest poets and one that serves as an example to others (including the 'big names') of how the art of poetry should be approached.