' God is a Manc ' poetry collection by Mike Garry

Reviewed by Simon Belt June 2010

Having come across **Mike Garry**, a Manchester poet whose work focuses upon the beautiful ugliness of the city and its people, just before the launch of ' **Go d is a Manc** ', I managed to do a little research on him and his poetry before reading this collection. And I'm very glad I did as it is not just a great piece of writing in its own right, but I think it's also the outcome of a process that attempts to take the reader beyond the Mancunian Meander collection I reviewed before the launch of this previously.

Mike cites his heroes are the underdogs, the outsiders, the people the glossies airbrush out. His first book, **Men's Morning** tells the tale of an inner city sauna and his second book, Mancunian Meander is a poetic journey around the south side of Manchester, its suburbs and people. Having worked on residencies in Strangeways prison, the Big Issue and Trafford Mental Health and most recently six children's homes in Manchester, the BBC and Arts Council England commissioned him to go to the north of the city and write a collection of poems about his experiences there. '

God is a Manc
' is that collection.

The cover of '**God is a Manc**' has a very Stone Roses, trippy and Hacienda / Madchester feel about it - actually based on a porcelain mosaic produced by Manchester based fine artist Amanda McCrann
, which was very inventively used in the PR work by
Alison Bell
running up to the launch of the 250 hand bound, limited edition version of the collection. Great time and effort, personality and passion have gone into this delightful production clearly expressing Mike's desire to see the written word in general, and presumably his poetry in particular, cherished. But then Mike did train professionally to be a librarian.

In the days before the launch, Mike certainly put himself about on local radio, talking about how he captured some the everyday lives and experiences of people in north Manchester, expressing them in poems to be read and thought about, and recited live. Indeed, I went to one of those live events which was a delightful blend of spoken word and music at the Oakwood in Glossop, on a Sunday night. It seems like an age since these types of events were put on more broadly - hopefully now there's a real demand for public performance, rather than a last gasp from a desperately declining pub life since the smoking ban, either way though very welcome.

The collection opens up with a short poem entitled **Pay as you Go**, about the consequences that a cavalier approach to the boundaries between personal and public life can have for those who pay the price in its wake:

She sings and she swings in the box bedroomWith half naked WAGS and hunks watching onSl ow beating heart, broken by a boyfriend

Who promised never to play kiss and tell
The gift of a picture on his birthday
Beamed to his phone as the church bell struck twelve
And that this was the sign that would prove it
Never imagining her pose, click, send
Would end up on Facebook for all his friends
And their friends, their friends and their friends of theirs
Printed and pinned on the school notice board
Flash bulbs pop as she loosens her tie
And Britney sings, "Hit me babe one more time"
reproduced from Pay as you Go by Mike Garry

The subject of this opening poem does move you on from the particular physicality of the Manchester Meander collection into a more shared experience of everyday life around Manchester - north and south, and to lives beyond. This more general and perhaps universal experience of everyday life that Mike begins to articulate through 'God is a Manc', is dovetailed with a more active situating of the reader as an actor in the depicted scenes of grim shared experiences.

Inviting the reader to make a difference, and kindle their yearning for change, Mike sees everyday people as both expressing the cause and the effect of problems we experience. There are some very grim and sobering poems in here, expressed in **Soldier Boy** and **Juxtaposition** for example:

Boots scrape on Crumpsall cobbled streetsInside the boots are fifteen year old feetKhaki pants tight at the ankle
Grip and hold like a white slave manacled
...
A caravan in the shopping centre
A man handing out leaflets showing boys on adventure
Smiling faces and glowing cheeks
But the leaflets are lies and the caravan man's a cheat
...
And he'll send them off to some sun-drenched front
To fight a war that no one wants
A roadside bomb ends it all
Then home in a box to Lower Crumpsall
excerpts from Soldier Boy by Mike Garry
A slow stroll with the soul-lonelyTo a pub on Oldham RoadWhere men salute and shake their

fists at Union Jacks Because they
have nothing else to believe in
Compare this to the stroll of the soul-lonely Pakistani kid from Crumpsall
Who walks towards the football match with a rucksack on his back and the promise of seventy two virgins in paradise
reproduced from Juxtaposition by Mike Garry

The sense of alienation from society and lack of collective bond despite a shared and common experience runs through Mike's poems, written and recited. A familiar theme by many a commentator - from not knowing your neighbours to people not holding the door open for you as they may once have. Indeed, the launch party at Odder on Oxford Road was a case in point. A venue probably more used to 'live' DJs than live performance was full with people standing to see Mike and his Guests including Marvin Cheeseman, complimented by great DJ set from Dave Hulston. This was not an easy ensemble to pull together.

And yet, there were people in the upstairs of the pub, albeit open for food and drink throughout the day and not exclusively for the gig, who had total disregard for any and all around them and carried on talking LOUDLY throughout until audience interruptions finally forced some to retreat

downstairs. Playing your part for the collective good used to be taken for granted in most social activities, yet now the personal consumer plea of the demanding *I want it* Andy character from Little Britain invariably followed by the
I don't like it
rejection is a little more vocal than might have been in more collective times.

Mike's rather eclectic mix of fellow performers for the evening hopefully represents something of a comeback for the performing artist which can only be a good thing, culturally and socially, though the form these performances take will inevitably be a reworking and interweaving of previously separate disciplines. A case in point is the MaD Theatre Company 's production of Angels with Manky Faces
at the
Dancehouse Theatre
on 15 July, which combines a reworked traditional story - scuttle gangs of Manchester in 1890's, with contemporary dance and music. Here's Mike Garry on the same issue in
Angels with Manky Faces
:

Close your eyesGo back in timePicture this in your mindA summer sky without sunshinePigs, dogs and rats are running wild
The smell of shite, the buzz of flies
Pub and mill on every corner
Streets alive with disorder
Open sewer, smell of sulphur
Poverty of the lowest order
...
Open your eyes
Return to modern times
Walk the streets and you will find
A summer sky without sunshine
Dogs as weapons running wild
The smell of weed, the buzz of flies
The pubs and mills on every corner
Have been converted to apartments
Cars, buses, trucks speeding by
The smell of carbon monoxide
Bouncing rain on tarmac streets
Different songs different beats
Ancoats 2010

excerpted from Angels with Manky Faces by Mike Garry

Lastly, onto the signature poem of this collection, **God is a Manc** which delightfully plays with with historical signposts switching cause and effect to ultimately invert the reading of history with aplomb. To end up with mildly convincing assertion (I am from Yorkshire remember) of God being both the creator of Manchester and yet the outcome of that creation is quite a feat, but one many a self important Mancunian must genuinely feel about themselves. Oh how I laughed, and then thanked the authors of "Yorkshire being God's own Country" for expressing the proper historical order of events and not helping themselves to too much altar wine as the Mancs who believe they're God must have!

I guess there are few better ways to articulate our experiences as shared, and having elements that are universal than by using the totalising foil of the singular God. I highly recommend you to get a copy of **God is a Manc** and see **Mike Garry** in person, so here's some extended excerpts from the title poem:

At the dawn of time before this all beganBefore stars and cometsBefore the B of the BangBefor e moisture, ether, bone and tooth
Before Jesus, Mary, Joseph, the truth
Before creation, civilisation
Before the dawn of man
God was putting the final touches to his master plan
But scratching his head and drawing all he could muster
He contemplated the enormous task of building Manchester
...
When it came to culture, God left Manchester to itself
Through natural progression the city would develop its own artistic and literary wealth
And that music, dance, film, theatre and art
Would flow as naturally as blood through every man and woman's heart
And that working hard was most important
But so's a game of footy on a Saturday and Sunday morning
So by ten o'clock the quandary was solved
He'd allow Manchester culture to slowly evolve
...
So he ensured that beneath our feet lay thick black seam after seam of coal

In our back yard and falling from the sky was the most natural of energy solutions
Inspiring the most influential Industrial Revolution
Factories, mills and mines made Manc the chimney of the world
Providing employment for miles around for every man, woman, boy and girl
Human wrongs and human rights other cities could only follow
Because what happens today in Manchester
Happens in the rest of the world tomorrow
...
Catholic rearing
Sunday Mass
The hours I spent in my RE class
The questioning, the quandaries, the constant confusion
Has helped me arrive at this unique conclusion
...
The Bible is a wonderful read
But not a book everyone chooses to believe
So when I read between the lines
My theological conclusion
Is that God, the creator of Man
Heaven, earth and the stars
Had to be a Mancunian
excerpted from God is a Manc by Mike Garry

Here's a YouTube video of Mike going through the first part of the God is a Manc in Central Library, Manchester - a place he must surely feel very at home in, cherishing books so much as the librarian he trained to be should.

Note from editor: The Manchester Salon will be hosting a discussion of poetry and the relevance debate entitled ' Poetry: its relevance and beyond ' on Wednesday 19 January 2011 at 6:30pm for 6:45pm start.