

## Fire and Crisis: Review by Degna Stone

*The Caiplie Caves* by Karen Solie, *Surge* by Jay Bernard, *Deaf Republic* by Ilya Kaminsky

*The Caiplie Caves* is the fifth collection from the award-winning Canadian poet Karen Solie. It begins with St Ethernan, a seventh-century Irish missionary, at a time of spiritual crisis. He must choose between establishing a priory on May Island or living a life of solitude:

in this foggy dispute-ridden landscape  
thus begins my apprenticeship in cowardice  
...  
will my fulfilment be the fulfilment of an error?

We know that there will be no easy answers or short cuts to help him – or us – navigate a way through, and in ‘When Solitude was a Problem, I Had No Solitude’, we are told that ‘Experience teaches, but its lessons / may be useless.’

*The Caiplie Caves* is set at a time of crisis, and explores faith, war, misinformation, and power. It is impossible not to read these themes against the backdrop of our current global instability. Nationality or political alliance aside, however, it is easy to understand the sense of dread that might accompany the realisation of a wrong decision, as in ‘A Miscalculation’:

... To turn back would have made sense  
but I chose otherwise, a lamp post  
at what I assumed was the golf course  
a fixed point I couldn’t seem to advance on  
like a misinterpretation pursued because now  
  
it is your life.

Solie has a gift for gradually revealing the horror of events, and in the case of ‘Whose deaths Were Recorded Officially as Casualties of “The Battle of May Island”’, creating imagery so startling that it is possible to imagine yourself within the terrifying scene:

Feeling the warmth of the self against cold abstraction  
No group of people has more in common  
More fear in their blood than oxygen at this point  
  
*Unstable land, unswimmable water, air needing light*  
As it was in the chaos at the beginning of creation

...  
Chains of the wake around their ankles  
Propellers tearing through them

The idea of ‘the north’ is something that is almost impossible to pin down, but Solie creates a strong sense of place in the intriguingly-titled ‘NO 59981 05825; 56.24324° N, 2.64731° W’:

calcareous sandstone outcrop on a raised beach  
level, short lengths of passage  
and as spectacularly weathered as the coexistence  
of good and evil, the earth pigments.

Throughout the collection, Solie asks us to think again about our relationship to the world and everything within it, (‘if it’s not use to us, is it useless? / If it’s useless does it still deserve to live?’), prompting us to consider the ecological consequences of waste, and how we might react to the discovery that our habitat is no longer capable of supporting life.

*The Caiplie Caves* is expansive, and as we veer across centuries the careful structure keeps us centred. Solie uses the power of three to great effect: the collection is written in three parts, there are three ‘Songs’, and we thrice visit Ethernan. The book has a tantalising depth, each reading bringing something new, and equally allowing space for the reader’s own preoccupations to emerge – perhaps even changing the ways we might choose to live in the world.

Jay Bernard’s debut collection *Surge* has been shortlisted for the Forward Prize’s Felix Dennis Prize for Best First Collection. Within it, they investigate and try to make sense of the 1981 New Cross Fire Massacre, when thirteen young black people attending a birthday party were killed in a house fire on New Cross Road in London. Almost 40 years after this event, it is impossible to read *Surge* without thinking of the more recent Grenfell tragedy, as Bernard observes in the introduction. The scandal of the government’s treatment of the Windrush Generation, meanwhile, also propels the urgency of Bernard’s exploration of what it means to be black and British.

There is a battle raging through *Surge*, of public narratives versus private truths, and Bernard impresses upon us the importance of the language used to record history. The truth can be manipulated and controlled depending on who is speaking. A ‘riot’ is not the same as an ‘uprising’, for example: the two words lead to very different interpretations of the same event.

The dub beat of ‘Songbook’ recreates the mood of the party on New Cross Road, that of teenagers having a good time. The opening stanza acts as a refrain:

Me seh ah one step fahwahd an ah two step back  
Me seh ah tree step fahwahd an ah six step back  
Me seh ah four step fahwahd an ah one step back

Me seh ah one half fahwahd an ah one half back

Bernard cleverly replicates the back and forth nature of race relations in 1980s Britain, and the (lack of) progress made during the fight for justice for the victims and survivors of the fire. As the poem progresses, the refrain intensifies, its strict rhythm echoing the horror of being caught in a fire.

The powerful diptych of the poems ‘+’ and ‘-’ becomes devastating when they are read together. These prose poems recall witness statements, effectively communicating the rawness of recounting events in the immediate aftermath of tragedy. ‘+’ is an unsentimental depiction of a father confronted at once with the horror of his son’s violent death and with suspicion and hatred from the police. In ‘-’, the simple language of a teenager speaking after death is heart-breaking. Bernard deftly captures the confusion, fear, and sadness:

– I had been at the party a few hours and I didn’t know anything about what happened, dad – and I felt someone touch me, but I was stiff, dad – I never been so stiff before – I tried to say it’s me, it’s me – but they were looking at me so strangely, dad – like he couldn’t stand the sight of me – Police always looked at me like that –

At the heart of each poem is a clear depiction of the institutional racism that permeated the police force and wider society. These poems are set in the recent past, but Bernard holds them up as a mirror to our present time.

Bernard is deft at creating searing images that remain long after reading *Surge*, as in ‘Harbour’, where ‘my voice became glass / breaking in heat’, and in ‘Hiss’:

Going in when the firefighters left  
was like standing on a black beach  
with the sea suspended in the walls

But sometimes words aren’t enough. In ‘Pem People’ written in memory of Naomi Hersi, a Black trans-woman found murdered in 2018, Bernard depicts the hopelessness of bearing witness, of being unable to find the right thing to say. Reading *Surge*, I was reminded of Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Both collections examine the effects of structural racism, and both reading experiences involve pain. Bernard shows us that no matter how hard it may be, we must continue to bear witness and fight for justice.

Ilya Kaminsky’s long-awaited and critically-acclaimed second collection *Deaf Republic* does not disappoint. The opening poem, ‘We Lived Happily during the War’, acts as a prologue and sets the scene for an unexpectedly theatrical collection. It draws attention to our propensity to look the other way when faced with atrocities that skirt around – but never directly touch – our own lives:

And when they bombed other people's houses, we  
protested  
but not enough, we opposed them but not  
enough.

Presented in two acts, *Deaf Republic* is full of dramatic tension, turning points, and climaxes. The main players are the puppeteers Sonya, Alfonso, and Momma Galya; their puppets are a recurring motif throughout, representing soldiers following orders as well as the townspeople. The collection is punctuated – or perhaps more accurately, reinforced – with illustrations depicting sign language.

In 'Gunshot', the execution of a young deaf boy in front of the whole town is the inciting incident. At the moment the gun is fired, the townspeople become deaf: both a reaction to the horror of what they've witnessed and an act of rebellion. In 'Deafness, an Insurgency, Begins', 'our hearing doesn't weaken, but something silent in us strengthens'.

We are reminded that history is made up of living moments in 'That Map of Bone and Opened Valves', and that in order for 'evil' to succeed, 'good' has to stand by and do nothing:

This first day  
soldiers examine the ears of bartenders, accountants, soldiers –  
the wicked things silence does to soldiers.  
They tear Gora's wife from her bed like a door off a bus.  
Observe this moment  
– how it convulses –  
The body of the boy lies on the asphalt like a paperclip.  
The body of the boy lies on the asphalt  
like the body of a boy.

The horror of a hanging, twitching corpse in 'Away' is eclipsed by that of a town standing by and watching as soldiers take away a newly-orphaned child. Kaminsky drives the point home with a sign for 'The Town Watches'.

These poems recreate a compelling narrative that pulls the reader through, and each new poem in Act One of the collection confirms the horror that has just passed. I say 'recreate', as it feels almost like we are reading a version of history that could have taken place at any time during modernity, in any country. Events that could be (are) happening now, that could (will) happen in the future.

There is a shift in tone during Act Two, with its dynamic sequence of poems depicting the epic acts of heroism carried out by Momma Galya and her puppeteers. Momma Galya, a 53-year-old woman, is at the heart of the insurgency. She is bolder and more fearless than the rest of the townspeople, as 'When Momma Galya First Protested' observes:

In a time of war  
she teaches us how to open the door  
and walk  
through  
which is the true curriculum of schools.

Poems with long lines gather momentum, creating a sense of holding one's breath for the inevitable showdown, only to be curtailed by the brutal reminders of the terror.

The poems in *Deaf Republic* are warnings. Or perhaps they are instructions, or questions. One thing is certain: the poems in this collection are extraordinary. We are living at a time when atrocities, and the silence that make them possible, are in plentiful supply. Kaminsky doesn't point the finger of blame, but he does ask us to question our own role in the way our world is evolving. Will you live happily during the war?