

Review: Motherland, Jo McMillan

<http://girlwithherheadinabook.co.uk/2015/09/review-motherland-jo-mcmillan.html>

I am a child of the 1990s - I grew up on PlayDays, the fall of the Conservative government and the rise of the Spice Girls. For me, Motherland is a piece of historical fiction, but I recognise that for many other readers, this novel has the potential to be more hard-hitting, particularly given its semi-autobiographical roots. Like her protagonist Jess Mitchell, Jo McMillan was the only teenage Communist in Tamworth in the late 1970s, something which it rapidly becomes clear is a rather thankless task. Jess' Saturday routine is to go into the shopping precinct with her single-parent mother Eleanor to sell copies of The Morning Star, much to the disgust of the locals. The battle to convert the unwilling people of the Midlands to Communism gets put on the back-burner however when Eleanor receives an invitation to go and teach at a summer school in the GDR (German Democratic Republic). Overjoyed at the opportunity to see Actual Socialism In Action, Eleanor and Jess travel over to East Germany - going from being pariahs in Tamworth to celebrated dignitaries in Potsdam.

From fairly early in the novel, I was reminded of Meera Syal's Anita and Me. There are some obvious parallels - both take place in the 1970s, both feature fish-out-of-water protagonists and in tone they both tend towards the tragi-comic. There are also certain elements of an Absolutely Fabulous dynamic between Jess and her mother however, with Eleanor having relentless enthusiasm and devotion to the Cause and the Revolution which is guaranteed to take place within her daughter's lifetime - by contrast, the reader watches as Jess begins very gradually to question the true value of the Communist state. In terms of humour, as the novel progresses from the 70s into the very early 80s, I thought too of Goodbye Lenin which captured a similar note of hyperbole in its portrayal of GDR fanaticism. Still, in many respects, Motherland is a very British tale - indeed while the word of the title is used by Eleanor to refer to the GDR or occasionally Russia, the main theme of the novel is about Jess' relationship with her mother.

jo mcmilland mother

(c) Jo McMillan

Eleanor's parenting may verge on the chaotic - she uses an old class register to keep a record of those on her hit list and has interesting standards of cleanliness, but despite all this her all-enveloping love for her daughter is conjured vividly on the page. Having grown up with a single mother myself, I did feel she had captured something of the bond - although I would emphasise here that my own mother is a Northern Irish Presbyterian for whom Routine Was Gospel. Coming from a family with a strong Communist pedigree, Jess finds herself the subject of random 'welfare chats' with her headmistress as well as becoming the first pupil in her school's four hundred year history to require a 'Social and Emotional Health' assessment. We can sense the author's own recollections in many of the more humourous asides, such as her mother's habit of apologising to the local Chinese and Indian takeaways for various British atrocities in their home countries - the Opium Wars in China, the Amritsar Massacre in India - leading to polite reassurances from the staff, "That's all right, Mrs Mitchell. Don't let it worry you. Enjoy your meal". Yet beyond all of this, we can see the desperation and loneliness behind all of Eleanor's frenetic activity - so we can understand Jess' silent relief when her mother meets Peter during one of their summer visits to Potsdam.

To Eleanor, the GDR is the place of milk and honey. Everything is better there - her own home features clocks set to GDR time, her furniture, her crockery - everything is better if it can be sourced from the Motherland. Her delight in meeting Peter is all-consuming

but even the much more cynical Jess is pleased for her, also finding friendship with Peter's teenage daughter Martina. Martina is more circumspect about the party, introducing a note of doubt in contrast to Eleanor's unswerving loyalty. Eleanor is wide-eyed and unquestioning in her support for the Soviet Union, she clicks her tongue in scorn at any reports that denigrate it, spouting propaganda verbatim and refusing to question even as cracks begin to show in the friendships she believes she has forged. Unhappy with the bond between Eleanor and Peter, steps are taken to separate them, revealing the ugly reality behind the smiles and the solidarity which the GDR appeared to offer. Peter is sent away, Martina is forbidden to contact the Mitchells and the fairy-tale which seemed about to come true crashes down.

jo mcmillan Jess references Nineteen Eighty-Four on several occasions, both as a set text she dreads since she will refuse to criticise the Soviet Union, and then also as a date which is still in her personal future. Motherland does not make political points on the same level. What it does capture is the milestone in childhood or adolescence where we begin to question our parents' values, that often silent moment of realisation: I would not do things like that. Jess feels pleased when she hears her mother howling in despair in the night since at least this means that on some level, Eleanor is recognising that what the GDR are doing is wrong. Even Jess' local branch of Young Communists, a figure of fun for so much of the novel, begins to take on a menacing dimension and the political beliefs which Jess has taken on since birth take on a poisonous tinge.

Motherland is about an era in politics now gone - Jess recounts sitting up to watch the 1979 General Election, heralded as a new dawn by her headmistress and acknowledged by all Eleanor's cronies as the beginning of the end, as everybody recognises that Mrs Thatcher will win. There is a bizarre kind of optimism about Eleanor's fervent belief in the revolution but when Jess recounts her mother's childhood as an evacuee, her early widowhood and happy memories of 1968, we realise that this is all she has to hold on to. The final pages are heart-breaking as we see what her dreams have been reduced to and even more distressing is the understated way that the cord has been cut between mother and daughter as Jess quietly turns her back on her faith in the Motherland - both genetic and political. There is a wistfulness to this novel - at no other time in one's life but the teenaged years can one ever feel certain about political truths, at no other time is one ever utterly convinced of being right. The teenager Jess knew that capitalism was wrong, but as the novel ends, we see that the adult Jess has rejected the absolute truths of adolescence. This was a highly self-assured debut novel shining a light on an aspect of history which feels as though it has been hastily forgotten.

Four-stars.

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