

 **Fiona Sinclair reviews Maria C McCarthy's 'Strange Fruits'**

by [Helen Ivory](#) on Sun 13 Nov 2011 17:33 GMT

**Maria C. McCarthy, *Strange Fruits*, Cultured Llama Publishing, 2011.**

Maria McCarthy's new collection *Strange Fruits* is dedicated to her best friend who died of cancer. It is published in aid of Macmillan cancer support. Dedications to her friend Karen frame the contents. The prose poem at the end of the collection, illustrating a day out for the two friends with its comfortable rituals of charity shops and lunch will resonate with anyone who is familiar with the casual intimacy of deep friendship.

Many of the poems would seem to celebrate cosy domestic life. For example the closeness of a snow bound couple:

You and I are propped up in bed  
checking emails on wireless internet,

However as the collection progresses, such security is seen as illusory as we are reminded that cruel events afflict every life. Thus the poem 'Ghost writer' recalls a friend for whom cancer *stole the plums from your voice*; in the eponymous 'Strange Fruits' a rural scene is marred by:

Stella cans, a Co-operative bakery wrapper  
with orange sticker, reduced to 40p.

The most affecting poem is 'Slipping down' a touching vignette skilfully using character and dialogue to recount a painful visit to a parent with Alzheimer's now in a residential home whose mind struggles with:

the half- formed thought refusing to set  
like jelly made with too much water,

This reminder of the harsh realities of life is delivered in some very fine imagery. The idea of comparing an Alzheimer victim's cognitive struggle to liquid jelly is arresting and absolutely spot on.

Many poems wistfully hark back to the poet's youth. Being roughly the same age I enjoyed the recollections about *tank top and platforms*. McCarthy uses the device of clothing throughout the collection to evoke memory. This symbol will I think speak specifically to women. The idea first appears in the poem 'I dream of a shop filled with all the clothes I've ever worn'. The poem examines the idea that clothes are the outward manifestation of the different people we become over time, and how with time we shed these different selves like skins. Consequently the older poet finds that the once cherished *lumberjack's shirt, no more fits than the red jeans I wore with it...* Similarly in a poem devoted to the narrator's daughter, clothes chart the girl's growth, culminating in her becoming a mother herself. This is a particularly skillful poem making exemplary use of 'show not tell', the daughter's development is described exclusively in terms of her clothing, starting with school gabardine and ending with now *an over-sized coat wrapped around mother and unborn child*.

McCarthy keenly observes the minute particulars of life in this collection; she is particularly good at transforming the mundane details of everyday day life into something remarkable. In the poem 'Missed you on the day it rained' the

narrator develops an unrequited relationship with a decorator she regards daily from her window. 'After the fire at Matalan' charts not only the fire but the aftermath where arresting imagery transmutes a burnt out store into

the carcass of this giant industrial bird,  
its carved bones bared like a half-carved turkey.

...reviewed by Fiona Sinclair