

Critical Responses to Feminine Gospels

Barbara Bleiman enriches her appreciation of Carol Ann Duffy's collection *Feminine Gospels* by exploring the responses of other readers, reviewers and critics, and offers suggestions for how to draw on criticism in your own writing.

Why read critical responses to texts? What's the point? Sometimes as a student of literature you can feel obliged to read criticism but without really understanding the powerful role that it can play. It's not a question of discovering the right reading of the text, or adding other views to place alongside or on top of your own, rather like a sprinkling of hundreds and thousands on top of the trifle. Rather, it's a way of drawing on other people's views to clarify your own thinking and help you *develop* your own personal response. In other words, it can make the trifle more tasty all the way through, giving you rich ingredients to put into the mix and creating extra layers in your response; it creates a deeper critical response, rather than just providing pretty decoration.

Critics, academics and reviewers in broadsheet newspapers are often people who've spent many years reading and commenting on literary texts and their breadth of knowledge and ways of reading can offer you an expert view - not necessarily one that you have to agree with but one that might give you fresh thoughts or angles.

When Carol Ann Duffy's collection *Feminine Gospels* came out in 2002, there were several reviews in the broadsheet newspapers. Some extracts from these reviews follow at the end of this piece. They take a variety of approaches, focusing on different qualities or aspects of the poems. For instance, Michael Woods focuses on the voice and tone of the poems, giving an overview of the broad approach of the collection as a whole, while Adam Newey draws attention to the way that Duffy combines the everyday with the lyrical and poetic.

Some of the critics express an idea about the poems in a particularly pithy or memorable way. Charlotte Mendelsohn's phrase, 'like a secret Guinness Book of Records for women' leaps out at me as being a particularly strong image for what Carol Ann Duffy may have achieved in her collection.

But instead of just going along with an idea or phrase like this, it's worth interrogating it to see whether it really holds up and whether, and in what ways, you find yourself agreeing or disagreeing with it. The critic's comment can become like a little bit of grit in an oyster, the irritant that makes the pearl grow. So, if I interrogate the 'Guinness Book of Records' idea, it seems to me to suggest a collection about female achievements, as if it's only looking at one aspect of women's lives - the successes. It suggests a superficial and perhaps rosy-tinted view of the female sphere. And yet when I flick through the pages of Duffy's book, I find myself thinking that *Feminine Gospels* is not like that at all. It's about hugely varied, often painful or difficult experiences, expressing subtle nuances and giving a strong sense of the complexities of the inner life of women of all different kinds.

The cleverness of the techniques in 'The Woman Who Shopped', or 'The Map-Woman', of taking something metaphorical and making it literal, and using it to trace a woman's life experiences, make them much more than the 'what if?' poems of wish-fulfilment about female achievement that Mendelsohn's comment implies.

If I were writing about *Feminine Gospels*, I could identify several 'gritty' little phrases or comments in the reviews that could both spark off my thinking in this way, and become the focus for making a strong point in an essay. It might be anything from questioning whether it's a 'dark book, for all the jokes', to agreeing that she is 'both lyrical and subversive', to exploring why I think it's more than just the 'ventriloquism' described by Mendelsohn that convinces one of the reality of the experience being conveyed and makes the poems so powerful.

If you're studying *Feminine Gospels*, why not read the extracts from reviews below, or go online to read the whole reviews that they come from? Try following more or less the same process that I've described above and take that through to the next step, which is to explore the critical comment in writing:

- identify ideas or phrases that make you think
- interrogate them to think about whether you agree with what they're saying and why, or whether they introduce a fresh idea that sparks off new thoughts about the poems
- try explaining to someone else your thinking about a particular phrase or idea in relation to the poems in the collection
- experiment with writing a paragraph in which you quote from the critic and use it to argue a point about the poems in the collection.

Extracts from Reviews

Critic 1

[*Feminine Gospels*] is striking in its pervasive use of the third person. The tone is more public and oratorical than personal in the longer poems, modulating towards the lyrical, interiorized and prayerful in the last poems in the book. *Feminine Gospels* should not be mistakenly read as feminist gospels. Here is a sequence of poems that seeks to explore the truths of experience through the refracting medium of myth and flights of the imagination.

Michael Woods, "What it is like in words": translation, reflection and refraction in the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy' in *The Poetry of Carol Ann Duffy* Ed. Angelica Michelis & Antony Rowland (2003)

Critic 2

There is nothing cosy about her vision, however. This is a dark book, for all the jokes, exposing equally the trash of our aspirations and the crumbling urban landscape around us. [...] Duffy likes to take a familiar psychological reality and extend it as an outrageous metaphor. [...] When she wants to, Duffy can write with lyric intensity [...] The poems near the end of the book - which are closer to prayers or love poems - have that kind of intensity in abundance. [...] Are these poems placed at the end to the book to signal a movement or development? We shall have to wait for the next book to know. For the moment Duffy prefers to wear a tougher face, and to keep her voice jaunty. She moves through the lives she invents with a kind of casual confidence which her characters sometimes briefly share.

Elaine Feinstein: Guardian Review (14 Sept 2002)

Critic 3

They are 'what if?' poems, from a world in which outrage, memory, a desire for babies or white goods can transform one utterly, like a secret Guinness Book of Records for womankind. [...]

Part of Duffy's talent - besides her ear for ordinary eloquence, her gorgeous, powerful, throwaway lines, her subtlety - is her ventriloquism. Like the best of her novelist peers - Rose Tremain, Michael Cunningham, Shena Mackay - she slides in and out of her characters' lives on a stream of possessions, aspirations, idioms and turns of phrase. However, she is also a time-traveller and a shape-shifter, gliding from Troy to Hollywood, galaxies to intestines, sloughed-off skin to department stores while other poets make heavy weather of one kiss, one kick, one letter.

What's more, from verbal nuances to mind-expanding imaginative leaps, her words seem freshly plucked from the minds of non-poets - that is, she makes it look easy. Which, as every schoolboy, polevaulter and politician knows, is the hardest, coolest skill of all.

Critic 4

Diverse as *Feminine Gospels* is, its poems are linked by two themes - fulfilled dreams and an adult's awareness of the consequences.

Charlotte Mendelsohn: *The Observer* (13 October 2002)

Critic 5

One of Britain's premiere poets here does what she does best, joining wild, surrealistic imagery and pointillist detail to create sharply realized, visionary poems [...] Duffy never settles for mere cleverness. Her poetic technique is sure and subtle.

Patricia Monaghan: *Booklist* (2003)

Critic 6

Carol Ann Duffy is at once lyrical and subversive, delightful and dangerous. No other poet I know occupies a place between such apparent contradictions.

Billy Collins, former Poet Laureate USA

Critic 7

[Carol Ann Duffy's] work has a kind of muscular, lyrical intensity, yet is always rooted in the muck and mulch of real experience.

Adam Newey: *New Statesman* (August 2002)

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