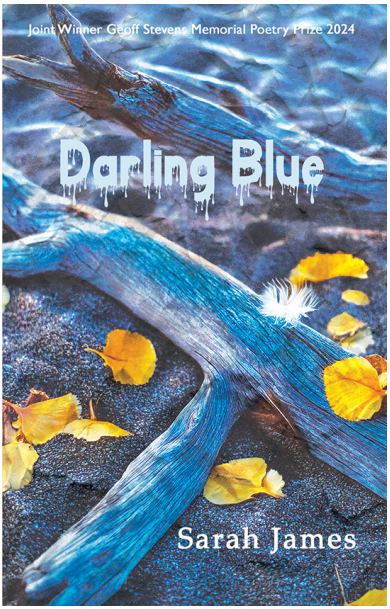
Book Review



Darling Blue

by Sarah James

Indigo Press, 2025; 58pp.
ISBN: 978-1912876976, £9.50 paperback

It is always encouraging to see the many ways in which the Pre-Raphaelites continue to inspire creative work, and this new collection of poetry is from a poet who has previously been placed in the PRS poetry competition, so it is a particular pleasure to see a full collection with Pre-Raphaelite inspiration. *Darling Blue* won the Geoff Stevens Memorial Poetry Prize 2024, and the PRS Poet-in-Residence, Sarah Doyle, wrote a great endorsement of the collection when it was first published:

> [*Darling Blue* is a] fascinating creative hybrid weaving ekphrasis and cohesive narrative, *Darling Blue* deftly balances its fictional speaker's personal response to various Pre-Raphaelite artworks, with rich descriptive hints that resonate way beyond the mere visual. Exploring the complex tensions between the public sphere and private activities, this collection is a gallery tour of the narrator's unfulfilling relationship with an unattainable partner, through to the ultimate redemption of self-worth and new love. James's finely crafted and intelligently controlled poems brim with vivid imagery and lush sensory detail, reminding the reader 'how brightly sunlight shines through // when freed from a cracked mirror'.

The Pre-Raphaelites, with their emphasis on the 'sister arts' of poetry and painting, their use of literary sources and focus on narrative and meaningful symbolism, invite ekphrastic poems, and we see many of these in our annual poetry competition. James's book extends ekphrasis so that these poems both engage with the paintings and also weave their own fictional narrative around them.

Colour permeates the book. It is named after *The Little Speedwell's Darling Blue,* Millais' painting (1891-2, Lady Lever), which ironically has only touches of blue in it, and which is inspired by lines from Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. The painting reflects a sense of loss as a small child gazes at a flower, while James's poem 'Darling Blue' describes the painting whilst adding a layer of its own:

How long
will she keep on picking? Beyond
her own death now she's painted into infinity.

The poem spirals from the painting to the child to the speaker's own future losses: 'a world with nothing left to pick'; 'the children I might want/ to have', setting the tone for a book that plays with all the meanings of the colour blue: beauty, sadness, skies, flowers, sex.

The poems more or less alternate between poems that mourn a lost lover and poems that are inspired by a Pre-Raphaelite painting, but that is not to suggest any disjunction between them. Poems such as 'Not Mourning' (inspired by Waterhouse's 'Gone, but not Forgotten' (1873, private collection) overlays the speaker's emotions onto Waterhouse's figure:

Perhaps, like me, she has just slipped out
of another life, and, instead of carrying this
with her, has chosen to leave her younger self
in a place where it can do no harm,
while the flowers strung across the stone wall
have grown from the thread of those stitches
she had to unpick to get free.

James's ability to recreate for the reader the emotions and situations of her poetic persona and to simultaneously extrapolate and bring to life the figures in the paintings makes this an absorbing and emotional experience. The Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic is carried over into the more personal poems which are not ekphrastic, too: 'Object(ive) Evaluation', a prose poem which asks 'If I were a painting, would he cut me from my frame?' concludes with a heady, sensory experiences which recalls Pre-Raphaelite poetics: 'all that's left is the loud buzzing of bees bumbling through blossom, drowsy-headed and heavy with sticky pollen.' The line carries an echo of Christina Rossetti's cynical assessment of relationships in 'A Triad': 'One droned in sweetness like a fattened bee.'

The poems in the collection draw on an unusual range of paintings, suggesting a deep engagement with the Pre-Raphaelite oeuvre, and the strong visual resonances throughout the poems allows the reader to experience it as a gallery visit in which the paintings we see summon up our own personal connections and emotions. This sense is augmented by the ability to quickly reference the paintings if you read with a smartphone in your hand, as each painting referenced is accessible through a QR code – especially helpful since some of the works are more obscure than others.

The poems move through a relationship, sustaining a loose narrative thread from initial, heady excitement to abandonment and loss and, eventually, defiance in the face of sadness. The penultimate poem, 'More than Neptune's Horse', returns to 'Neptune's Horse' by Walter Crane, an image referenced early in the first poem in the book, reasserting the strength and individuality of the narrative speaker in echoes of the first poem. The blue sea with its crashing waves is constructed as a metaphor for freedom:

Try to ride me if you dare, if you think
any bridle could restrain or control me.

You will never come close; no one
will tame or break my spirit –
it haunts all you'll ever see or touch.

The book closes with blueness, 'a blue so intense/it can only ever grow deeper', a nicely ambiguous closing for a poem entitled 'My last unsent letter', but the image and colour that stays with me after reading the book is red: the opposite of blue in the colour wheel, and with very different resonances, in the poem 'Before something burns or bursts', inspired by Collier's *Priestess of Delphi* (1891, Art Gallery of South Australia). Does the speaker see herself as the priestess, 'a blood-rush blaze/ of bright red cloth in place of flowing hair', in a witchy inversion of the more conventional Pre-Raphaelite woman? The poem is about heat, passion, anger, and the possibility of being consumed by flames, but, the progress of the poems soon shows us, that fiery red is soon consumed by the blueness of the sea.

Serena Trowbridge