

## REVIEW

## Life to the Power of Two: A review of Mary M Talbot and Brian Talbot's *Dotter of Her Father's Eyes*

*Dotter of Her Father's Eyes*, Mary M Talbot and Bryan Talbot, Dark Horse Books, 2012

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Mary and Bryan Talbot's genre-defying collaboration is an elegant exploration of dialogue. Through the words of gender studies scholar Mary, and the artwork of graphic novelist Bryan, *Dotter of Her Father's Eyes* tells two, hazily contiguous coming-of-age tales: Mary's, in sepia-toned 1950's Lancaster, and that of Lucia Joyce, who adolested across 1920s Europe in the wake of her father's erratic literary career, which is rendered in inky blue-black tones. Brief references to the Talbots in the present day are depicted in full, if muted, colour. The title references *Finnegan's Wake* (Joyce 1939) whose work unites the narrative threads. Mary Talbot's father is Joycean scholar J.S. Atherton, whose *Books at the Wake* (1959) traces Joyce's late, literary allusions. Atherton, an absent and increasingly abusive figure, uses his scholarship to exclude and cruelly humiliate his daughter.

Joyce is a more kindly "Babbo", and 1920's Paris a far more permissive place than post-war Wigan. Yet Joyce's genius is equally difficult for his daughter. Lucia's nascent dance career is blighted by her parents' disinterest and their frenzied, peripatetic existence. Her eventual commitment to a mental asylum,

aged 24, is depicted in a haunting double-page. She hurls a chair at her mother, and is subsequently trapped in a cycle of house-arrest and incarceration. The pages are largely wordless, dominated by fractured, kaleidoscopic images of her face pressed up against iron bars, and, in a sad pastiche of earlier triumphs, her dancing body restrained by straight-jackets.

*Dotter* recently became the first graphic work to win a Costa prize, in the biography category, but as biography it suffers from over-simplification. Nora is a two-dimensional fury, and Lucia's discovery of her illegitimacy is unconvincingly touted as a primary cause of her incipient madness. The Talbots' stance on Lucia's life is uninterrogatively influenced by Carol Loeb Schloss's contentious, recuperative biography *To Dance in the Wake* (2003). Both too often substitute speculation for scholarship. As graphic memoir, too, *Dotter* falls short of seminal status. Mary's recollections feel unsatisfyingly slight; her text lacks the beguiling humour of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000), or the playful experimentalism of Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006).

But in an increasingly monologic culture, *Dotter* is a profound celebration of dialogue. Counterpointing Mary and Lucia's stories elegantly expounds their cross-cultural simi-

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larities and divergences. Lucia's lover, Samuel Beckett, is devoted before all else to James Joyce, and he quickly abandons her when she ceases to further his ambitions. That Mary resists the madness that claimed Lucia is subtly attributed to her partnership with Bryan. Unlike Beckett, Bryan pursues Mary solely for herself, and wants nothing more than to remove her from her father's sphere of influence. Their relationship's enduring strength is palpably evident in the lovingly co-authored work that we hold in our hands. Mary wryly flags up Bryan's narrative intrusions: inserting his own, childhood book into a pile of hers (Talbot and Talbot 2012: 14) and giving her mother an apron she 'wouldn't have been seen dead in' (13). At such moments, the Talbots draw attention to the dialogue between word and image that is axiomatic to the graphic novel. This seamless and extraordinarily rich marriage of form and content thus stakes a claim for the increasingly visible and varied graphic fiction genre: that it insists upon the dialectically generative, bifocal nature of human experience. 'One voice

alone concludes nothing and decides nothing' as Bakhtin concluded, 'two voices is minimum for life, the minimum for existence' (1973: 213). *Dotter's* pervasive dialogism proves life-affirmingly expansive.

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