
'[Mancunian Meander](#)' poetry collection by Mike Garry



Reviewed by [Simon Belt](#) ☐ June 2010

I first became aware of **Mike Garry** and his poetry when PR agent [Alison Bell](#) emailed me some promotional flyers including one for the launch of Mike's third book '

[God is a Manc](#)

'. As I was born and bred in Yorkshire, God's own country, and moved to Manchester on a civilising mission when I turned twenty, and having lived and worked in and around Manchester most of my adult life, I was intrigued to find out more (truthfully, I was smitten with a couple of rebellious Manchester ladies at the time and thought if they were what Manchester offered, I wanted more!).

So, I was definitely going to go to the launch of Mike's new book and in preparation I did a little research on him, online of course - but then I was holidaying in Menorca. Between Mike and his PR agent, and whoever else, it was certainly easy to find out about him - he's all over the show on the internet, and seems to have been involved in a variety of poetry writing and citing in libraries, schools, prisons, street performances, and festivals. I had to get hold of his written work to see what was causing such an impact, which leads me onto this review.

Whilst working out how to get an advance review copy of his new collection, I received a Facebook message that Mike would be on Radio Salford reciting some of the poems from his second book **Mancunian Meander** as well as ' [God is a Manc](#) ', so I tuned in online (I now live in Derbyshire). I was immediately struck at how rich, interwoven and pacey the poems and delivery were and wanted more, and I got more the following day at the Oakwood in Glossop when he'd been invited by [George Borowski](#)

& The Fabulous Wonderfals to promote his poetry. What a fabulous guitarist and singer George Borowski is (of 'check out Guitar George he knows all the chords' fame), with a fabulous set of his own, but also sharing the stage separately with Mike Garry and a newly formed school band giving them their first ever gig!

I mention the Oakwood gig because the atmosphere was so open, down to earth and relaxed, involving well honed and highly accomplished professional artists, you had to keep asking yourself why these type of events aren't more popular today as they might have been in previous decades. I finally managed to get a copy of Mike's second book, the **Mancunian Meander** (Gorton Girls Know all the Words to songs by Chaka Khan, published September 2006) - a poetic journey around a city, its suburbs and people, duly signed by a matchingly open, down to earth and relaxed author.



In **Mancunian Meander**, Mike focusses on the 'beautiful ugliness' of the East-South central areas of the city of Manchester, and attempts to capture and repose in prose the salient aspects of the everyday life of his heroes; the underdogs, the outsiders, the people the glossies airbrush out. Being born in Chorlton-on-Medlock of immigrant background and moving to Fallowfield as part of the slum clearance when six, Mike grew up in South Manchester and has worked on residencies in Strangeways prison, the Big Issue, Trafford Mental Health and most recently six children's homes in Manchester. He is very well placed to observe the particularities of his surroundings.

Mancunian Meander is described as a Mancunian's rhythmic meandering search for the soul of the city - a peek behind the net curtains into a world we don't want to look at. With funding from a variety of sources for him to develop poetry across the city and also from the BBC and the Arts Council to extend the Mancunian Meander to include poems of life in North Manchester, with [God is a Manc](#), it seems there is a demand to look at or hear from the soul of the city.

Having spent more years than I care to admit systematically door knocking to promote Irish freedom or to campaign against immigration controls, in just about every street in South Manchester, and more so than North Manchester to be fair, the opening poem entitled ***Mancunian Meander***

captures quite graphically the mood and social change of moving along the 53 bus route from Gorton through Rusholme, Moss Side and onto the Alexandra Park estate - maybe only 4 miles in total but each location does invite you to feel a world apart from the one next door. The dislocation experienced in what was close to the centre of the riots in 1981 is summed up well here:

Fight your way off the 53 At Rec. park on Great Western Street
And walk in mellow laid-back state
Towards the famous
Princess Parkway
Watch the
commuters
Driving to their networked computers
Pick up their quids
Then drive home to the wife and kids
And curse the price of childcare

In Wimslow, Hale and Alderley Edge
excerpt from Mancunian Meander by Mike Garry

Long a magnet for the dispossessed and students, trendy and otherwise, Hulme and the dislocation caused by rushed town planning initiatives that had all the hallmarks of top-down, do it on the cheap, comes in for a tongue lashing on many an occasion and from different angles. Here, in a poem entitled **Regeneration**, Mike weaves the consequences of the smug middle class lives of town planners with the fractured consequences of treating people like pawns to move about like they're in a game of chess:

These people who redesign our lives
Live a million miles away with their wives
And kids who play
on vast green lawns
Framed by blooming flower beds
But would swap it all for a Sunday with Dad
They are far away from floating dust
Speeding cars that maim and kill
A different kind of hurt
A different kind of pollutionville
excerpt from Regeneration by Mike Garry

Although celebrating the way in which individuals eke out their own survival mechanisms in the outer city areas, Mike lambasts the structural constraints and degrading environments that people have to live in - when abundance or at least plenty is near at hand, he doesn't just stay there but turns his attention to the stymied vision given by the city centre and all its metropolitan offerings. In **City Living**, there's some very funny and telling observations of the ways various project teams conspire (though not consciously) to create a vacuous and sterile view of the future, led into with:

In sunless piazzas
In silver furnished windswept shady collonades
In bars where nothing ever happens
by the half And beer is only sold
grated chocolate floats Freshly
Then slowly melts into a white artificial effervescence
That will be sipped, slurped and dabbed
From the lips of the beautiful people
The movers and shakers
The makers and breakers
The fifteen-minute mateys
The no givers only takers
Ad men in pastel brainstorm for their latest campaign
Selling Manchester without the rain
An umbrella the size of the county
Will be deployed

And cloud busters will be positioned in Chadderton, Heaton Moor, Urmston and Hyde
All rain dancers will be rounded up, baubled to stop
Them boogieing out of town
Then, brick by brick, sod by sod and mound by mound
The Pennines will be taken down
excerpt from City Living by Mike Garry

I could go on and on about how compelling and engaging a read Mike Garry is, but I'd just like to highly recommend this poetry collection for what it is and leave you to read it in its entirety. The only downfall is not the poems themselves, and certainly not their crafting, but perhaps more the subject matter and focus. Reading the poems and listening to Mike recite them evokes in me the Auden poem entitled **Night Train** in the way it has a dynamic given through the word-craft but also because of the dynamic of social relations captured in those crafted words. Alas though, it's the lack of going beyond the confines of the personal immediacy and Manchester in particular as the train in Auden's poem does delivering the post to connect disparate people that leaves me wanting more. But then I'm from God's own country so what do I know?

Mike says of himself "I'm a performer – I stand in front of large groups of people to read and talk about Poetry. I don't know why people like it so much to be honest. All I'm doing is reading my scribbled thoughts and talking about them. I call it the "Frank Carson effect, i.e. it's not necessarily what I say but "The way I tell em". I'm incredibly lucky, but I believe you earn your luck. I know loads of poets, ten times better than me at the craft, who struggle to get work or paid for what they do."

I guess the answer of why Mike Garry is a man of the moment, beyond his craft being excellent, lies in the failure of politics, politicians or those in society that organise it to be able to connect with or have any real idea what goes on in the minds of everyday people. Seemingly gone for now are the days when the BBC thought they knew what we were thinking and doing and when the Arts Council knew best what was good for us in terms of art, replaced by a plethora of

attempts to connect with us. Thankfully, with Mike Garry, they've sponsored his trip to North Manchester, so I can't wait for the '[God is a Manc](#)' collection. I'll leave you with Mike's public recital of his excellent **Saint Anthony, Saint**

Anthony... talk to me

poem actually published in his new collection, which is in many ways I think the spirit of the BBC and Arts Council England's desire to get Manchester to speak to them for they too have lost something.

Note from editor: The Manchester Salon will be hosting a discussion of poetry and the relevance debate entitled '[Poetry: its relevance and beyond](#)' on Wednesday 19 January 2011 at 6:30pm for 6:45pm start.