

Love and Death

ti amo, Hanne Ørstavik (And Other Stories)

My Mind To Me A Kingdom Is, Paul Stanbridge (Galley Beggar Press)

ti amo is a short novel that explores love, loss and mourning. In less than a 100 pages, Hanne Ørstavik dissects sorrow and grief, drawing upon her own experience her husband slowly dying. She remembers the mundane joys of life together, shared moments, problems, discussions and solutions as the novel moves both forward and backwards in time, reliving scenes from the past and watching her partner die as morphine gradually takes over.

It is also writing about writing, a self-conscious text which considers the act of documenting, embellishing and sharing very personal experiences and responses. Mostly, however, it is a book about love and what that really means beyond notions of romance, when love becomes friendship, companionship and shared lives. The opening sets up this discussion:

I love you. We say it to each other all the time. We say it instead of saying something else. What would that something else be? You: I'm dying. Us: Don't leave me. Me: I don't know what to do. Before: I don't know what I'll do without you. When you're not here any more. Now: I don't know what to do with these days, all this time, in which death is the most conspicuous of all things. I love you.

Love becomes a lifeline for both characters, a catalyst that makes dying bearable for the one left behind, eases the one who is dying. Amazingly, Ørstavik keeps well away from any mawkishness, her writing is effortless, clinical and precise, which helps facilitate our engagement, helps keep us reading even as the narrator is numbed, exhausted and in shock:

I've been feeling so very low. It feels like it's never going to be possible to ever feel happy again, buoyantly happy, the kind of happiness I used to know, in which the thought of death was quite absent. I think that from now on any happiness I feel will be tinged with death.

Gradually everything becomes a normal part of life, 'death has become an attendant presence, everything's just the way it is. I'm here with you and soon you won't be here any more.' Except of course, he is, embedded and ever-present in this book: 'it has to do with presence, energy, and I believe in that.' I think that after reading *ti amo* I might too.

Paul Stanbridge's *My Mind To Me A Kingdom Is*, is also a self-aware and self-conscious book (sometimes to the extent of awkward mannerisms and convoluted syntax), revisiting and documenting various subjects, the layers of interest in obscure and seemingly unrelated topics. 'Had I been capable of observing myself more clearly,' notes Stanbridge early on in

the book, he would have perhaps acted differently, and at times I wished he had, and spared us the obsessions and trivia he unearths.

The back cover blurb tells us that '*My Mind To Me A Kingdom Is* is a book bursting with the joy of discovery, the beauty of the world, and the rich, warm pulse of life', but actually it is obsessive and dysfunctional, with Stanbridge following divergent paths and associative networks of meaning. It is also in part another book about death, as the author grieves and mourns for his brother who took his own life back in 2015. It also sometimes about the author's own illnesses and injuries, both physical and mental.

Mostly, however, it attempts to be philosophical, literary and knowledgeable, the author trying to rely on a never-ending conglomeration of facts and truths, which he eventually comes to realise are not what matters. 'Even as I worked, I knew that I drew further back from my aim – whatever that might have been', he acknowledges early on. He is avoiding the issue, seeking diversion by looking away from the problem he is trying to solve. Finally, he has to learn to grieve for and accept the death of his brother.

For this reader it's slightly disappointing that his way of resolving it all is a long digressionary treatise on trees in nature and mythology, invoking Pan and Yggdrasil en route, which ends up with a desire for mystical and biological union with a tree, where he finds 'the buds and leaves of him [his brother], where the life is, but where it also ends, where the mystery of it all resides', noting also that he too will become part of the soil and nature. I really wanted to like this book but, especially in comparison to *ti amo*, it is obfuscating and annoying, a lot of words and information rather than clear-minded and clear-sighted discussion.

Rupert Loydell