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Book review

The White Bird Passes

By Jessie Kesson

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The White Bird Passes is an autobiographical novella published in 1958 by Scottish writer, playwright, and poet Jessie Kesson. Born in a workhouse in 1916, she lived in a back lane slum in Elgin until she was eight, when her single mother was judged to be unfit, and Jessie was sent to an orphanage. There she received a basic education, showing sufficient promise for a university place to be discussed. She later referred to this time as 'the golden years'.

I first became aware of Jessie Kesson in 2021 when novelist Jenni Fagan and actors Genna Allen and Chloe Wyper adapted one of her plays, *You've Never Slept in Mine*, for the Edinburgh International Book Festival. I then read her fascinating biography; *Jessie Kesson: Writing her life* by Isobel Murray, before progressing on to this book. With poverty and *The Promise* so much in focus at the moment, now seems like a good time to revisit this novella, published 65 years ago and describing the care system a century ago.

Jessie Kesson's childhood and experiences of care were often the focus of her work. Her early stories, in *The People's Journal* and *The Scots Magazine*, led to her writing radio plays for BBC Scotland. Again, she referenced her life in the lanes of Elgin, her childhood, and her memories of her mother. Themes and stories overlapped as she constantly re-imagined her past, teasing out finer details and re-aligning facts in order to make each iteration truer than the last.

Finally, these polished, hardened stories became the basis for this, her first book, which is a series of vignettes told through the eyes of eight-year-old Janie. It tells of her life in a poor, crowded slum, *Our Lady's Lane* in Elgin, in the 1920s. For Janie and her friends, the lane is home, with all the feelings of warmth and security that are associated with the word.

The White Bird Passes divides Janie's life into two periods - a few weeks in the lane as she and her mother struggle against poverty, and then the years spent at the orphanage, which culminated in her preparing to leave for a new life outside of care. Young Janie is spirited and active and the lane offers excitement and adventure. At the orphanage Janie is dutiful and more disciplined, but retains her daring streak.

The prose is pared down to the minimum, with little space for description. It is the vibrant characters who create the world, and their authentic dialogues which drive the story forward. This style does work, but the reader is left wanting to know more. There are certainly enough characters and threads of stories here for both Janie's life in the lane and then in the orphanage to make full novels in themselves.

The main themes of the book are poverty and abandonment. Janie's poverty is obvious, from the single room she shares with her mother, Liza, to her lack of shoes and clothes, and her need to beg for food and money. The slum is a tight-knit community with a strict – and enforced – pecking order. Janie lives in a world dominated by women who are proud, brittle, resilient, defiant, vulnerable, and strong.

Liza had been abandoned by her family, and Janie felt the abandonment of having no father (although she created one in her imagination). Liza was determined not to abandon her daughter, but ultimately failed, and when she later makes a solitary visit to the orphanage, the relationship between them has been broken.

Yet, through it all shines the enthusiastic, life-affirming wonderment of Janie, who spends her days cadging coppers, avoiding the child welfare officer, visiting her traveller friend, and dreaming that one day she and Liza could live in a house in the country with a garden and a goat.

At the orphanage Janie grows into the routine and thrives at school. But when the chance of university is raised, it is decided that her poor and disrupted background is not suitable for higher education. This decision to thwart Janie's potential is fiercely resented. As the orphanage trustees consider an appropriate future for her – an under-housemaid, or a farm worker perhaps – she angrily replies 'I don't want to dust and polish, and I don't want to work on a farm. I want to write poetry. Great poetry. As great as Shakespeare.'

The characters in *The White Bird Passes* are not broken – but almost; not hopeless – but almost. They suffer the relentless adversity of their poverty, taking pleasure in small comforts and victories. Janie's childhood is hard, but she

is loved. Her life undoubtedly improved at the orphanage, in terms of health and regular education, but wrenching her away from her mother broke their nurturing bond.

This book reminds us how rudimentary social care was a century ago. Janie and Liza had only the parish to help them. They feared the authorities more than hunger and their only support was from impoverished neighbours. Janie was removed because her mother was poor, and sent a hundred miles away, beyond her mother's love. The orphanage was largely hidden away from local village life, and Janie was prepared for domestic service. The language in the book, like the attitudes, can be jarring and unforgiving. The trustees regard their wards as irredeemable, the damage unmendable. Janie suffers from a 'disintegrated personality', her flaws are 'bred in the bone'.

After leaving the orphanage, Jessie had a breakdown and spent time in hospital. She was then 'boarded-out' on a farm. Boarding-out was a common way to re-introduce institutionalised children and young people into society, where they would benefit from hard work and hard religion. She married and spent 15 years as a cottar – a tied farm worker – in Aberdeenshire. Despite the hard work and poor pay she found strength enough to write.

Jessie Kesson later worked as a producer and writer for the BBC's Woman's Hour. She wrote four books, over 100 radio plays, numerous articles and poems and had a family. In 1948 she was invited to give evidence to the Scottish Advisory Council on Child Care about the boarding-out system.

Jessie Kesson's early life was not unusual. Poverty dominated communities just after the Great War. But her determination to write and her constant re-visiting of her childhood, paring down those early memories and experiences to their essence, have produced a moving insight into common life and care experience in northern Scotland in 1920s.

About the author

Jeremy Bayston has spent most of his career in print media. He has worked at CELCIS for three years and is part of their communications team.

The review author was reviewing their own copy of this book.