

*Dancing on the Outskirts* by Shena Mackay

Virago, £16.99

Reviewed by Melanie White

In keeping with the title, most of the characters in Shena Mackay's short-story collection *Dancing on the Outskirts* are fringe-dwellers: small-time thespians, spurned lovers, isolated artists. Though their circumstances may be rooted in the everyday mundanity of a work trip or a bus ride, through the chaos of their inner lives Mackay bestows upon them all the energy and colour of a flamenco or, more messily, a dervish.

With about 20 story collections and novels to her name (one of which, *The Orchard on Fire*, was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1996), Mackay is a writer who should be more widely celebrated. She's at the top of her game here, especially when she focuses on a single character and draws surreal contrasts between their fervid mental states and external realities. This is the intersection from which she extracts much of her humour and poignancy, as with the obsessive schoolteacher in one of the best stories, "Electric-Blue Damsels". The teacher, summed up by his "pipe-smelling breath", stalks a cinnamon-hued student with inept longing, from her jobs at a chippy and a pet shop to her performance in a local rock band. Onstage, she wears "blue shoes with spiked heels that could tear a man's heart out, sharp as the weapon of the sturgeon-fish, that has a retractable scalpel at the base of its tail."

Mackay's gift for colour crops up frequently, her visual observations glittering throughout the collection like jewels. In "The Day of the Gecko" a girl sports the "bruised purple fruit of love bites"; in "Grasshopper Green" an old woman's hair, once "bright as a red squirrel," is now a "grey-tawny pelt", and a security light's "yellow glare" illuminates the "violet autumn evening". In previous interviews Mackay has said that she is synaesthetic, seeing words as colours, and this is a boon for her writing, studding it with vivid details that bring her stories to life.

Mackay is a master of subtle irony, and there are few stories in *Dancing on the Outskirts* not fuelled by the comedy of unexpected juxtapositions and her skewering perception. The daydreaming photographer in "The Running of the Deer" imagines identities for the walkers she sees around Richmond Park: "There goes The Poet, she thought, flagellating himself like some medieval penitent. With a supermarket carrier bag." Ultimately, a greater punchline awaits when she discovers this romanticised figure is, in fact, a prosaically middle-class man, with a cashmere coat instead of black rags and private school fees to pay.

Undercutting her characters' expectations is one of many things that Mackay does exceptionally well, and she does it in a way that's delightfully surprising for her readers, too.