



Review: Stonehaven by Mark Belair

2nd December 2020 (<https://www.neonbooks.org.uk/review-stonehaven-mark-belair/>) /
 Neon Books (https://www.neonbooks.org.uk/author/admin_krishan/) / Reviews
 (<https://www.neonbooks.org.uk/category/reviews/>)

Author: Mark Belair (<https://www.markbelair.com/>) | **Publisher:** Turning Point Books
 (<https://www.turningpointbooks.com/belair.html>) | **Buy:** Amazon
 (<https://amzn.to/3mvw4Lp>) | **More:** Goodreads
 (<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/56125078-stonehaven>)

Stonehaven, a book-length project by Mark Belair, describes itself as, “A fictional memoir in prose couplets” – a unique form for a narrative that is itself intensely original. This work uses the conventions of poetry and the conventions of memoir in equal measure to create something blended, strange, and utterly absorbing.

There is an element of experiment to *Stonehaven*. According to the blurb:

“The narrative borrows from music the three-movement form of the sonata – exposition of themes; development; recapitulation – while the text, as in film, renders the behaviour of the characters without authorial comment, leaving all interpretation to the reader.”

That is, indeed, an accurate description. The work is underpinned by a coming-of-age tale – the narrator grows up, makes mistakes, narrowly escapes trouble, argues with a sibling, and prepares to move away from home. Through it all they grow in ways that are both profound and imperceptible.

Readers might be used to narratives which grow steadily more climactic as they progress. Here, however, the drama is more subtle. There’s no apocalyptic change, but instead a steady series of smaller happenings. While there are moments of drama, the narrative resists the temptation to conform to the pattern we expect of a story.

This refutation of narrative convention makes the work feel very much like a memoir. As in life, there are no neat conclusions here, but instead a gradual process of growth which the author captures with stunning acuity. The ultimate effect is like a slow-motion film which gives us time to focus on every detail and every nuance of a particular moment in a particular life.

Belair writes in couplets throughout, but doesn’t often rely on rhyme. When it is used it provides a pleasing emphasis and urgency to the text, without feeling forced or overly bright. The use of a poetic form also allows for more subtle emphasis – some lines run on while others are cut short, some pairs are evenly matched and some contrast.

Stonehaven is a swift read, but everything about it urges the reader to slow down, to dwell on the detail and the musicality of phrasing, to experience the narrator’s world with measured and patient attention. It is a unique project – a form that is rarely seen or used elsewhere – but one which delivers something likewise unique and remarkable.

Tagged Book Review (<https://www.neonbooks.org.uk/tag/book-review/>), Experimental (<https://www.neonbooks.org.uk/tag/experimental/>), Literary (<https://www.neonbooks.org.uk/tag/literary/>), Mark Belair (<https://www.neonbooks.org.uk/tag/mark-belair/>), Memoir (<https://www.neonbooks.org.uk/tag/memoir/>), Novella (<https://www.neonbooks.org.uk/tag/novella/>), Poetry Book (<https://www.neonbooks.org.uk/tag/poetry-book/>), Small Press (<https://www.neonbooks.org.uk/tag/small-press/>), Turning Point Books (<https://www.neonbooks.org.uk/tag/turning-point-books/>)