

Rachel Sills, *Two Hundred Houses, Knives Forks and Spoons* -

<https://www.knivesforksandspoonspress.co.uk/product-page/two-hundred-houses-by-rachel-sills-24-pages>

Reviewed by James Davies 2016, first published in Shearsman online

Rachel Sills' *200 Houses* is a little gem of a book in the mould of George Perec's *Two Hundred and Forty-three Postcards in Real Colour*, and just as funny. As the title suggests it is a serial poem of 200 numbered short descriptions of perhaps imaginary people and their imaginary houses. It is written using either one or two clauses per description – 'Gillian's House has a kitchen extension' and 'Hugh's house is often used as a film location, which can be very lucrative'.

As with these sorts of projects, which use 'mundane' subjects as their basis, if they're done right hilarity grows as the repetition puts the mundanity more and more into focus. List poems are also kept vibrant by subtle shifts, nothing too much. In each description in *200 Houses* the clause's sole verb switches from description to description, seemingly arbitrarily, from 'was' to 'is' to 'had' to 'has' – 'Tommy's House was next to the Mormon Temple' and 'Gwen's house is in Abergele' and 'Beth's house had white vinyl sofas and smelled of Alsatian' and 'Dee's house has two front paths'.

Humour seems to be the chief function of the poem. The examples I've used (and throughout the collection) are reminiscent of the phrases used in a 'Teach Yourself' a foreign language book. An example from my *Teach Yourself Danish* book is as follows – 'I only go to the baker's when the sun is shining' which is funny because of its artificiality and isolation. This element of humour is no different in *200 Houses*. But lines such as 'Lenny's house had a machete in the cellar' is in contrast to a *Teach Yourself* book as the image grows in resonance due to the idiom's relocation to the site of 'the poem', as well as the poem's seriality. Also, like Perec's postcards, the speed and the lucidity with which we are introduced to so many characters and landscapes is a real pleasure – all carefully chosen, with names to match the décor, like the 'glass front door with a sunburst pattern' in Rita's house.

My only reservation is the amount of characters who live in Manchester – six at a quick count. No other geographical area seemingly has as many descriptions devoted to it – 'Mark's house is in Northenden' and 'Joanne's house is a 1950s semi on the bus route to Stretford'. Such heavy use of place names nods to the poetry of Frank O'Hara and The Beats. Now I love Manchester, having lived there half my life and happily calling myself a Mancunian, yet I'm not sure that Manchester, by virtue of it being so prominent a player, warrants the romance which is bestowed on it. However, this is a dilemma that I'm glad is posed by *200 Houses*. Manchester is not Paris of the 20s or New York of the 50s, yet there is certainly excellent poetry coming out of the city – more than there has been at any other time in its history, so perhaps it needs some name-dropping?

But maybe there is another way to look at these Manchester lines which all describe houses out of the city centre. We know poets don't live in the city anymore; no one does anymore. More horrifying than the general gentrification of cities is the gentrification of people and of language, as Sills writes in description 75 'Fenella's house is on the most desirable street in Didsbury'. Perhaps then on reflection these Manc lines work? Perhaps they are good and necessary, highlighting the contrast between the life we live today and the life lived by those hip folks who used to hang out on Bleecker Street.