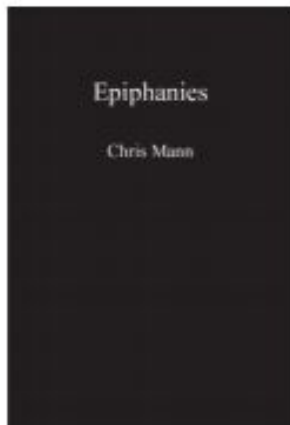


Chris Mann, *Rudiments of Grace*, (Cathedral of St Michael and St George, 2014); *Epiphanies*, (Cathedral of St Michael and St George, 2018)



Rudiments are “the first principles or elements of a subject, those points which are first taught by one commencing the study or practice of a branch of knowledge” (OED). Chris Mann, whose *First Poems* appeared over thirty years ago, is still learning. *Rudiments of Grace* tells, in a sequence of prose introits (“The landscape and the guide”) and forty-five poems, “the story of a secret love affair”, a story of love at first sight, courtship, marriage, and parenthood in the context of work, the lack of work, the demanding political history of South Africa and the coming of age. The brave autobiographical

candour of the poems’ treatment of love in all its manifestations—affection, friendship, eros and agape—is one of the striking features of the collection. Chris Mann paints a (loving) picture of “a small town in a hinterland” that is the primary setting of the story, and the poet’s rhythms shift as the relationship blossoms and settles: from the control and awkwardness of ‘First Meeting’ and ‘First Conversation’ to the assured intensity of ‘Consummation’ and ‘Vespers’. The onus of some of the poems is to advance the story, with details of place and purpose, but all point to intense moments of the acknowledgement of grace, and the celebration of identity, of individuality in community. Perhaps because they speak to the poet’s (and to this reviewer’s) present, I found myself most moved by the last two poems in the collection: ‘Evensong’ and ‘A Farewell in Advance of Death’. In that last poem, the poet promises that he will be “yours to call back as a shade”: Chris Mann, who invokes Dante as his guide, has done his mentor proud.

In the Christian calendar, the Feast of the Epiphany commemorates the showing forth of Christ to the gentiles, in the person of the Three Wise Men: in the literary imagination, at least since Joyce, 'epiphanies' are 'sudden spiritual manifestations' and Chris Mann's *Epiphanies* is a sequence of insights and visions of grace: sometimes arising out of contemplation of and interaction with the created world, sometimes from intense or even casual self-scrutiny. Such epiphanies are as much connections as discoveries, and Mann recalls and imagines them in a variety of ways in this sequence of short prose sketches and verse in various forms. Sometimes the resonance of the setting and action are Biblical ('Eden', 'The Laughter of Jesus', 'Jonah', 'Gadarene Heights'): the poet identifies with Paul in 'Facing Failure in Corinth' with a disciple in 'Doubting Thomas', with Mary Magdalene in 'Mary of Magdala's Dream', and with an imperial soldier in 'The Roman Centurion on Good Friday'. Chris Mann's historical imagination seems just to me here, as it is for example in 'Saying Good-Bye to the Romans' from *Heartlands* (2002). Many of the poems find their epiphany in the natural world ('The Healing in the Mist', 'Bright Clouds', 'Chameleon'), or in precisely remembered places ('A Small Church in the Drakensberg', 'To Christ near Winchester Cathedral') and small gestures of intimacy ('The Spirituality of a Hug'). Sometimes the insight comes with grief and loss ('Death Beside a River at Dawn') and the rewards are not always calming or contemplative, as in the rage of 'Warships in Simon's Town Harbour' and 'Love and Evolution'. Sometimes the inspiration is philosophical or, as it were, in scientific observation, and, although specifically Christian in myth and doctrine, the poems seem also to find a kind of transcendence in the millennial past and future of the universe.

Perhaps at work here is episodic memory, which Chris Mann has elsewhere called "the psychic mechanism by which moments and people of the past are made alive again in one's inner world in the guise of 'shades' and crucially contribute to shape one's sense of belonging" ("The Poetry of Belonging..." in *English Literature: Themes, Interpretations, Contexts* (Venice, Ca'Foscari). To this collection, as to Chris Mann's work as a whole, the shades are crucial, as 'In Praise of the Shades' and 'The Parliament of the Shades' explicitly testify. Again, perhaps for time-of-life reasons, I found 'The Reverence of Ordinary Things' a particularly powerful poem.

Some of these poems have been incorporated and sometimes re-worked from Chris Mann's earlier collections. (In fact three from *Rudiments of Grace* are in *Epiphanies*.) It seems to me just that a poem may find a context in a new overall thematic vision. What may be more puzzling is that some of the earlier stanzaic poems are here reprinted as prose, and some of the new work, seemingly printed as prose, both scans and rhymes. Perhaps the poet intends some of the verses of this work to carry a Biblical textuality? In any event, Chris Mann is still learning and we should be grateful for these two beautiful collections.

■ **Tony Voss**