



# Fiction Feedback

## Review: *Duchess of Tooting* by Lynnette Hopkins

*Duchess of Tooting* is a creditable foray into the literary world. It is of an equal standard to other published works in terms of plot, dialogue, humour and characters and makes for a good read in the genre of chick lit.

The opening page draws the reader in immediately. Initially it could be accused of being too formulaic and very Bridget Jones, with the dieting and the trying to cut down on the drinking. This is handled well though, and in a very different style to Bridget Jones, and for many readers the theme wouldn't pose a problem – it pulls the chick-lit reader in. The rant very early on about lifestyle TV presenters is perhaps a bit long, and though it's funny and witty and well-written the reader becomes a little impatient. A judicious cut or two here would help.

The author shows a skilful use of humour and wit. There are some laugh-out-loud moments, such as the Lonely Hearts adverts, Mel's driving, Mel's exposition of Izz's holiday experiences and especially the orgasmic experience in the gym. While some of these, for instance the driving, could be seen as a rehash of generic comic moments, most are original.

Of more concern, though, the driving and the holiday experiences are also over the top, and risk calling into question the reader's credibility. Mel wouldn't still be on the road if her driving were really as bad as that; Izz probably wouldn't be considering going abroad ever again, assuming she'd returned from last time. Given that everything about this novel and the genre is over-the-top – the story, the characters, the situations – this flamboyance is possibly forgivable. However the author might want to consider reining these sections in just a bit to keep that hold on credibility. Readers of this kind of story are very willing to go a long way out of the norm for laughs, and will suspend disbelief to a large extent, but there is a limit, and I wondered if the author exceeded it here and there. (For further guidance the author might like to re-read Kathy Lette who writes in a similar style; the situations she describes are laugh-out-loud funny but they are also credible – just about.) An easy solution: both sections might be allowed to retain every element of their extravagance if the reader was told they were exaggerations; Mel in the case of the holiday experiences, Izz relating the incidents of Mel's driving. But twice in one short section could be pushing it.

The dialogue is convincing, pacy and flows well. It moves the story on and is believable, bringing the characters to life. The characters themselves are well drawn – with Isabel (Izz), the main character, being portrayed as a loveable eccentric, who is dizzy, but fun. The reader loves the idea of Izz having quit her job even though she has a nine thousand pound overdraft, and loves it even more that Izz herself recognises this action as 'bold'. Very amusing. Her distortion of the truth in life, as well as in her resume, is, simultaneously,

irritating yet funny. It also tells us what we're likely to enjoy in the rest of the novel, and how the plot-line will develop, which is what the reader is looking for at this early stage.

Returning to Izz's character, some readers might have liked to see Izz physically more clearly from the outset, and of course the author gives herself opportunity to do this early on, especially in the wardrobe-clearing scene with Mel. However, others could take the view that not introducing a physical description until later on, and then for a reason – to draw the comparison with older sister Pauline – is skilful and adept. To decide, the author should think of her target audience; if they are of the kind who very much value physical description and who, to empathise with a heroine and build a greater understanding of character, need that physicality in their heads, perhaps introducing a brief description sooner would be a good idea.

Characterisation is also good when it comes to Mel, Izz's flatmate. Her predilection for auctions and buying from the internet, to say nothing of her driving, is a nice bit of characterisation and one with plenty of opportunities for development. Her tireless involvement in the bidding for the chaise longue and the search for orgasm-inducing gym equipment is determined indeed! Mel is an appropriate companion and a foil for Izz's extravagances while her own character is far from pallid.

The description of Nikki is humorous and gives us a pretty clear idea of his character, though we wonder a little why he doesn't feature on Izz's list of romantic conquests.

Occasionally there are some parts where pace has taken priority over explanation, such as when Izz takes the twins to a party and dresses as she does. There is a very effective description of Izz's attire, which is not particularly suitable for a party for three year olds! Who was Izz expecting to meet? I assumed she simply dressed up because she was going out in public, and a party, whether for children or not, is a party to Izz, but this could have been teased out just a little more; other readers could be puzzled. The author made funny, fabulous descriptions of the other mums in joggers though – effective at demonstrating Izz's own concerns and priorities.

The style of writing is very chatty as though the main character is talking to the reader. This gives an intimacy and friendliness to the prose and helps enormously with characterisation and pace, a big plus point. However it doesn't help the author with her punctuation, and this is a big problem for this author. There are a lot of mistakes in punctuation especially, and quite a few in grammar and spelling. This causes some disruption to the smooth flow of the story, as it distracts the reader. This is the piece's major flaw, which is a good thing as it is so easy to rectify.

One punctuation fault which can be immediately sorted out is the author's use of dashes. Partly this is because they shouldn't be there at all – the stylistic device of having them after full stops is unnecessary and irritating. Partly it's because they are rarely of the proper kind. They should be what are known as m dashes, and an example of one is two lines above. Instead, the author uses n dashes or heifens, which should only be used to link words, as in *car-park* or *floaty-arty-style*. She often uses two together, --, which isn't English as we know it. I don't think a publisher would appreciate its introduction here! To type an m dash, hold the control key and hit the dash key found at the top far right of most PC keyboards.

Poor grammar however does not preclude superb use of language. In this piece, there is some unusual usage of words, such as *She boggled at me levelly* and some newly invented

vocabulary such as *trollied* (as in pushing a supermarket trolley at speed – a very evocative term! I'd suggest it should be spelt *trolleyed* though.) The author needs to review these carefully to ensure that they add to the narrative and don't detract from its credibility. In most cases the inventions were excellent and added to the amusement, and the characterisation too. I thought them overall an exciting feature of this writing.

In summary, the piece is well written (punctuation and spelling errors apart) and so pacy I was left breathless. At first I thought this might be a drawback, but whether the pace evened out a bit as the story went on or I caught up with the frenzied style, by the end of the piece I was steaming ahead with Izz in full enjoyment. Credibility (apart from the punctuation) is the main problem area and needs to be addressed. Otherwise it's a great read with narrative drive, plot, style and characterisation all scoring high marks for me.

The synopsis is interesting and makes me want to continue to read to find out how on earth Izz manages as a tour guide, especially as she is unable to speak a foreign language and has major trouble with directions! It promises to be a hilarious jaunt and should be an excellent story. I look forward to its completion.