***Brain Graft* by Laura** **Solomon. Hong Kong: Proverse Press (2017). RRP: $38.48.** **from Fishpond. Pb, 56pp. ISBN: 9789888228645. Reviewed by Jeremy Roberts. [STILL AWAITING COVER]**

A few decades ago, ***Brain Graft*** might have seemed like science fiction. While the play starts in 2030, the setting seems remarkably contemporary. In a world where organ donation is standard, and artificial intelligence is becoming more mainstream, the idea of grafting or joining human brains together in order to achieve some benefit does not actually seem too bizarre. The notion that people will be able to sell part of their brain is part of the twist that author **Laura** **Solomon** has come up with – perhaps not so much to shock an audience, but rather to raise questions about ethics and relationships in general.

The central character, Isobella, a young, educated, upper-class professional woman working in London, is diagnosed with ‘stress-induced psychosis and manic depression’. She has been struggling with life, finding everything way too fast and bewildering. And even though she stops and stares for twenty seconds and often collapses, she does not believe she is depressed. Finally, after a CAT scan, an MRI and an EEG,a brain tumour (a grade 2 astrocytoma) is discovered, the actual cause of Isobella’s symptoms.

Solomon has written *Brain Graft* with the convincing tone of somebody who knows about brain tumours; she was in fact once diagnosed with one. Isobella is told, ‘The risks are death during surgery, infection, stroke’. Alongside this hazardous prospect, strong, parallel themes of mental health, abortion, and sexual politics course, manifest in the varied personalities of the four main characters. While the play maps Isobella’s journey – medical and psychological – as she moves through one relationship and into another, all four protagonists are well defined and each effects major decisions throughout the play.

Scene 5 (revealing the diagnosis) is one of those ‘moments’ that nobody ever wants to be in. You feel like a spy. When the physician advises Isobella that she has a brain tumour, she asks ‘How long have I got to live?’ The narrative here is scarily written and you find yourself wondering to what degree Solomon was recounting her own experience. There is, however, humour in the scene – a repeating joke, one which Isobella (and subsequently other characters) savours. The physician, explaining what an ‘absence seizure’ is, phrases it as ‘A momentary lapse of reason’ to which Isobella retorts: ‘Oh God, do you have to quote Pink Floyd at a time like this?’

The notion that psychological analysis is not necessarily reliable is central to *Brain Graft.* A strong case is crafted that physical/neurological reasons should be explored as routine in some patients.

The brain graft donor, Tracey, is a sixteen-year-old, working-class girl. She donates a brain segment that controls personality. Tracey is apparently the antithesis of Isobella. Her lifestyle revolves around alcohol, casual sex, abortions and no ambition whatsoever. When Tracey gets pregnant, she initially decides to have (another) abortion. The abortion clinic visit is quite brutal, imbued with a decidedly ‘pro-life’ tone. When Tracey goes for a consultation, protestors are yelling ‘Killers!’ at the front door. The pros and cons of abortion are brought into focus by the character of Kylie (Tracey’s best friend) who speaks against the idea. But, interestingly, Kylie also suggests that Tracey sell part of her body to pay for the impending motherhood. Street-smart Tracey uses the urgency of Isobella’s situation to obtain more money for her ‘donation’.

The post-op scenes are very humorous as both Isobella and Tracey undergo personality changes, a tone which nicely balances the more serious material. Isobella disgusts upper-class boyfriend Tarquin by wearing a boob-tube, reading magazines, and squeezing cheese into her mouth as she watches *EastEnders.* She also hangs around a sleazy pool hall and lets a strange man kiss and grope her. Meanwhile, Tracey demonstrates growing maturity, seeking reliable employment and saying, ‘It’s time to get a job that I can realistically manage.’ The personality changes of Isobella and Tracey will alter their destinies. The inference is that the rest of us are pretty much stuck with who we are.

*Brain Graft* is very much concerned with ‘sexual politics’ and the power within relationships. Here, the (sexist) male characters decide the fate of their (heterosexual) relationships. The cliché that ‘women are from Venus, men are from Mars’ comes to mind. But this is also the conventional bed on which the play partly rests. Both Isobella and Tracey initially play out stereotypical roles, taking predetermined pathways. **À**[propos](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/propos#English) **the** encoding, Solomon’s choices of character names are interesting.

Given the lucky happenstance of meeting again four years later, Isobella and Tracey turn to each other after they have been ‘abandoned’ by the men. It is worth noting that there was never any hint of attraction between the two, in their previous ‘pre-op’ scene. Tracey makes the proposal: ‘Since the men in our lives have turned out to be such swine, maybe we could make a go of it together’. The women seem fully aware that it is a combination of the failure of their heterosexual relationships and the reconfiguration of their brains that effectively opens them to the idea of a lesbian relationship. This is in fact the play’s happy ending. The neurological/psychological aspects of human attraction displayed in *Brain Graft* are there to ponder. Solomon even poses the question by having Isobella ask: ‘Do you think that the heart rules the brain or the brain rules the heart?’

I suspect that conservative audiences might find some content disturbing. Tracey, for example, has the operation to remove part of her brain while still pregnant. Solomon is very scathing of conventional medical intervention to deal with depression. ‘Happy pills’ are shown to be deceptive, a quick fix, even dangerous. Tracey’s partner David believes that the anti-depressant pills he was on deluded him to the point of thinking his relationship with her was a good thing. This is a sad outcome since, originally, David is very supportive and encourages Tracey to make a lot more of herself.

The men in *Brain Graft* do not come off well. They may initially show some empathy and caring to their partners, yet ultimately their own needs dominate. Tarquin is generally patronising and dismissive towards Isobella: ‘A bout of mental illness is nothing to be ashamed of…it’s *de rigeur*, darling’*.* He eventually plays a cruel trick on Isobella to discard her as she swings between ‘Isobella-mode and Tracey-Mode’. In the end, Isobella tells Tracey, ‘I was just his little trophy’.

Solomon has looked deeply into her own experience and applied it with ingenuity in her craft. *‘Brain Graft’* is compact, streamlined, perfectly packaged for today’s short attention-spans. Like somebody faced with a life-threatening condition, Solomon has decided not to go for the slow-build, not wasting a minute in her play. *Brain Graft* is a rapid-fire, uniquely-motivated examination of crucial segments of modern society, with engaging, often funny dialogue, and peppered with wit. Isobella declares,‘I think if aliens came to earth they might remark that the internet was the dominant organism and the humans were merely its servants’.

The adage that bad things happen to good people ripples like a powerful undercurrent and offers a vicarious, nervous thrill for the audience. Solomon is not wrong in suggesting that many of us are ‘trapped’ in our lives and sometimes incapable of seeing our relationships for what they really are. Our own personalities have far more influence on our lives than we probably realise.

*‘Brain Graft’* deserves to be a sensation.