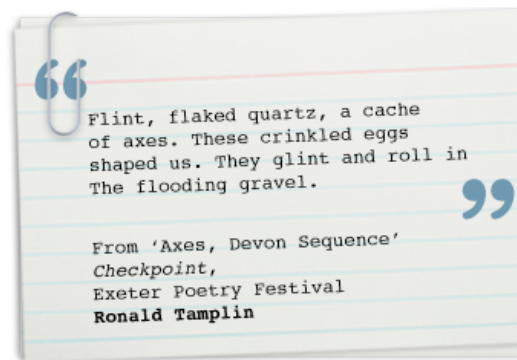


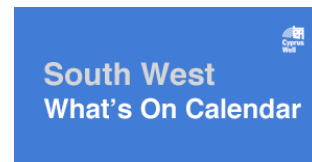


Good Morning! It's Tuesday on May 03, 2011.

Literature for everyone in the South West



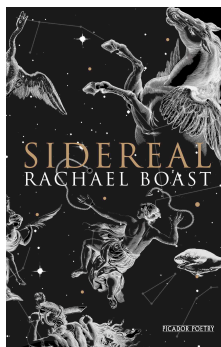
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Literature Clips

M.R. Hall *The Disappeared*

RACHAEL BOAST



Rachael Boast was born in Suffolk in 1975, and has recently completed a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of St Andrews. Her work has appeared in *Ambit*, *Poetry Wales*, and *The Yellow Nib*, and in the Long Lunch Press anthology, *Addicted to Brightness*. *Sidereal* is her first collection and is out now from Picador. She lives in Bristol.

Cyprus Well was lucky enough to catch up with Rachael to ask her about her new collection and poetry in general.

Congratulations on *Sidereal*! Your publishers Picador describe it as "dominated by astral influence and divine chance, by unseen or remote causes; but despite its celestial title ... full of terrestrial concerns." How would you describe the collection?

Overall, it's a book about time, cycles of time; structures which are vaster than we are and how we fit into them. It's not a book of poems about astrology. The astrological themes are tied in with an overall exploration of time. A sidereal day is approximately 3 minutes shorter than a solar day. If I said that the poems were written in those nebulous 3 minutes that would be a fairly accurate description of the book.

Was there a particular moment or particular poem that unlocked the thematic sense of *Sidereal* or was it a more gradual process?

I was drafting the collection at the same time as writing my thesis, an exploration of the



John Haynes and You (courtesy Seren Books)



relevance of the Book of Job to contemporary *ars poetica*, and when the break-through came with the thesis it did impact on the thematic sense of *Sidereal*. However, the poems may have impacted on the thesis as well. There was an energetic cooperation between the two. The title came well before the book in any way resembled what it is now. But the point is, like the thematic premise of the book, so came the poems: however long it takes for the work to become what it wants to be, rather than what our ideas for it are. Although it's very much a thematic book, I didn't clock what was happening. I just kept an eye on the time.

When you were working on refining the poems into the collection that is now *Sidereal*, how did you go about it? Can you tell us a bit about the practical experience of making a collection?

As poets, we train to practise something enough to know, not what it's going to be, but how to make it happen. Only when the thematic sense became clearer could I start intervening, if you like, and ordering the collection. As with Job's fortunes, everything in the first part of the book is doubled in some way in the second. A 7 part poem coupled with a 14 part poem, for example. There's a poem on a painting in the first part and one in the second. There's a poem of 2 stanzas of 11 lines in the first, and one in the second. So I've also mirrored or repeated material. A phrase in one poem becomes the title of another. The structure of the book came to mirror its themes, macrocosmically. The last poem in the first part ends with a prayer. The first poem in the second part begins with one. And so the overall structure of the book resembles an hourglass. I decided I'd decant the contents of the first part into the second, and so on. At the same time, some of the new work I was writing whilst editing the collection was written for it; the last poems to be included were 'Ephemeris', 'Void of Course', 'Longhand' (which means the last line is a fib), and 'Human Telescope'. But I didn't think, ah, there's a poem missing here. It just happened that way, as though by that stage those new pieces were an inevitable part of the pattern. Sequencing the collection was enormously enjoyable; the opposite of a Spot the Difference game. Writing on W.H. Auden in 'To Please a Shadow', Joseph Brodsky asks whether a song, a poem, or speech itself is a game language plays to re-structure time. We can do that with a single poem and we can also do that with an entire collection. There are no coincidences in *Sidereal*. After a few years of it, I knew what it wanted to be. I'm glad my work wasn't accepted any earlier. I like Heaney's principle that if you think it's finished, get a bit further with it.

Reading *Sidereal* is a magical experience, and to echo your publisher, very much in heaven as on earth, so to speak. Good time to ask the question about poetic inspiration maybe, do you have any theories on how poems happen, where they come from?

First and foremost, there has to be a cooperation between the heightened sense of something, the inspiration, and the managing of that into poetic form. You can't hand someone a lump of uranium. You have to wrap it in lead. Poetry is something that, it seems to me, has an independent spirit. Or it's a state where self and otherness, below and above, meet, and merge. Unusual things occur in that middle space. Poems happen when we make that space our habitat. For me, poetry is reality's invisible architecture.

Another practical question - when you start working on a poem, can you tell our readers a bit about the process from idea to page - do you have notebooks, for example, a usual process of revision, very little revision, and so on?

I burnt all 64 of my notebooks on the beach in 2002. For me, notebooks imply I'm intending to write, or intending to revise, and I can't do it that way; I can't be that organised. Few of these poems began with an idea. Most began without one. They start where they start, and ride on a course towards their own inevitability. I'm encouraged by the way that ideas can travel across long spaces of time, stored in our minds for days, months, or years, and eventually end up in the right poem. 'Cycle Path' was like that. One image from that poem came from something I wrote twenty years ago, something that brought to the poem a dimension that was missing. It began as a poem about a bike ride and some vague stuff about pond skaters, and became a poem about the wheel of fortune. And so, revising is also part of this larger structure of time. Ideally, the work can be going on continuously. Occasionally a poem is written in an afternoon, but behind that miracle of quick-thinking lies a long labour of love. To generalise, the revision process is

akin to translating what Osip Mandelstam described as the 'hum': keep revising until the poem reaches its linguistic inevitability. Nothing else could, or should, be said.

Is there a poet whose work particularly inspired you at an early stage of your career or even poets whose inspiration might be found in *Sidereal*?

It's hard to say what's in the mix. It's been heated up so much. But stylistically there are obvious hints of Heaney in 'Other Roads' and 'Avenue of Limes'; the structure of 'The Long View' was modelled on Don Paterson's poem, 'Rain'; 'Frosted Fields' is a tone poem after Yeats. I'll also pay my respects to Coleridge, who I love dearly, and Rilke. I'll leave it to you to guess where Geoffrey Hill fits in.

Do you feel that poetry in the UK is thriving?


It need hardly be said that there are some tremendous poets at work, but they're a generation or so older than us novices. For the younger poets, obviously it takes time and consistency to establish a reputation. And, to be harsh, it depends on what we mean by thriving. In contrast to other periods in history, contemporary poetry can look pretty inadequate. I do, however, feel like we're on the cusp of something very exciting, if we can get over some of the less helpful ideas that are in circulation in our current social climate. If we feel there's some kind of hurry to get published, it's probably better to stay silent for a while longer, at least until the hurry disappears, because the first duty is always to the work. And poetry is a private thing, initially. If the work is exposed too early to some kind of expectancy, personal or public, that can damage a young person's potential.

At Cyprus Well we ask all the writers we speak to about digital developments in publishing - ebooks, ipads, kindles and so on. Often the focus in this debate seems to be on fiction. How do you view these new developments from the point of view of a poet?

All the poems in *Sidereal* were downloaded from the Cloud information infrastructure and then kindled in a pan suspended above a bunsen burner. But, seriously, there's nothing like holding a book in your hands, and turning the pages, especially if it was bought in a second-hand bookshop. No one has signed an ipad with "To Alfred de Lafontaine from Douglas Tinske, 1886". Nor can you take an ipad for a walk in a field like you can a slim volume. We're doing a disservice to future generations if we rely too heavily on technology. We all know there's already a down-turn in the market for The Selected Letters. And you can't scribble on a screen. So we've lost our marginalia as well. Paradoxically, these digital developments aren't as liberating as they seem. But then, my editor has threatened to drag me kicking and screaming into the 1990's. So perhaps I'm not the best person to ask.

Thank you, Rachael!

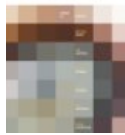
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