

Writing from
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Alex Pheby

Amanda Hodgkinson
Gill Lowe
James Powell

Keith Jones
Haydn Middleton
Lucy Tate

no.

173

The journal of

Suffolk Book League

sbl.org.uk



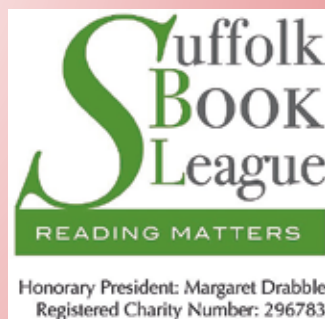
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suffolkbooktalk



Suffolk Book League



BookTalk

OCTOBER 2019

Created by Keith Jones
and Jeff Taylor

about us

Suffolk Book League is a registered charity that has encouraged a love of reading since 1982 and continues to support a range of local initiatives across the county.

Aside from bringing a range of popular and distinguished writers to Suffolk, we have held short story competitions, donated books to hospital and hospice libraries, supported literacy groups and partner events, including the Suffolk Libraries School Book Mastermind competition.

Past speakers include Terry Pratchett, Doris Lessing, Sarah Waters, Hilary Mantel and Wendy Cope.

If you would like to be part of the next issue of BookTalk, or just fancy a chat, please send your contributions, thoughts, ramblings and comments to:

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from the chair

Welcome to Booktalk 173. After much discussion we have decided that this will be the last copy of BookTalk circulated to members in a printed form. This is partly motivated by wanting to go paperless for ecological reasons, but also because the cost of printing and posting BookTalk is currently taking up over half of your membership fees. This leaves less to spend on our events and our support of community projects. So, from Booktalk 174 the journal will be e-mailed to members rather than posted. We know there are some members who don't have e-mail addresses, and so we will print off copies of BookTalk for them to take away at the next meeting they attend. If people do not have e-mail or attend meetings they can just let me know and I will make sure they get a print-out of BookTalk in the post.

Helen, our treasurer, stepped down from the committee at the last AGM but has kindly continued to cover the role until we have someone to replace her. We are happy to say that we have three new members of the committee and we are looking forward to their

ideas and contributions. We now need someone to join the committee who is willing to act as treasurer. The treasurer manages the SBL bank accounts, which means they record and bank all receipts, cash and bank orders, authorises and deals with payments and maintains the petty cash box. They complete working accounts papers for SBL committee meetings via an Excel spreadsheet programme, and they produce a Treasurer's Report including annual accounts for the AGM. They liaise with the membership secretary to ensure membership fees are paid in a timely manner and the membership lists are correct, and make a gift aid application annually. They act as a trustee for the SBL and submit our annual return to the charity commission. If that sounds like something you could do I am sure Helen would be very happy to chat to you about it, so please let me know.

We have another full and interesting programme of meetings in the year ahead, and I look forward to seeing you there.

Jacquie

the act of reading

Tessa Hadley visited us recently, and afterwards wrote to us:

'So great to remember that there are groups like your Book League out there, full of such authentic love for literature, so well-read and with such sophisticated understanding. Of course that's who we writers are addressing, always. But so reassuring to meet that audience in person.'

It's important we remember that the Suffolk Book League is more than an indulgence of our pleasure in reading. Of course, we hope that sharing the experience of writers, and offering some reflection on the pleasure of reading through our reviews and recommendations is rewarding. But our aims are bigger than that. We believe that the act of reading is one of the very greatest of humanity's achievements. Learning to read is one of the best gifts we give to our children. The sharing of wisdom and imagination through the written word is one of the most reliable indices of what we mean by civilisation.

It's ridiculous, isn't it, that we should need to reach for such pompous declarations to state what should be obvious? Surely our world is full to bursting with written opinions? Surely, we have to hand more means of reading, by Kindle, by Ipad, by paperback, by magazine, every kind of literary matter?

We in the SBL warmly approve of literary festivals (especially the ones nearest to us), and the meetings of book groups among friends, as we do the work of university departments devoted to creative writing. Finding and treasuring good writing, saying why we like it, and opening the eyes of others to what they might easily have missed, requires mutual encouragement and exchange of views. So, pleasure is increased. So, the benefit which only books provide is spread. So, writers are encouraged. So, we find that reading is not just being diverted when we are tired. It is one of our most worthwhile activities while we are alive.

If you belong to a Book Group, have you remembered to recommend the SBL to them? If you have enjoyed a book, or made a new discovery in your reading, have you thought of submitting a brief description to BookTalk? We love to hear from you.

tessa hadley

BY AMANDA HODGKINSON

In May, the Suffolk Book League had a large and appreciative audience for Tessa Hadley's talk on her writing life and her latest novel *Late in the Day* (Vintage Books). Tessa Hadley is a novelist whose work shines light on the complexities of lived life - on art and creativity, work and sex, love and loneliness, memory, marriage and family dynamics. *Late in the Day* follows the story of two long marriages and the effect of the sudden death of one of the husbands. Couples Alexander and Christine, and Zachary and Lydia, have been close friends for years but when Zachary dies suddenly, their lives are turned upside down. The novel examines the ways profound loss affects who we think we are and how we relate to others. The novel also looks at the ways in which we build memories and the ways in which the past can shape our present. As one character says of life; 'Sometimes these days I almost think I can do without the present. The past is enough for me, it's enough for my life. Does that sound insane?' Hadley's carefully constructed sentences and delicate yet powerful framing of life events within a dramatic narrative is exceptional. Listening to her read from the novel and then discuss in open and

'Few writers give me such consistent pleasure'
ZADIE SMITH

TESSA HADLEY

Late in the Day



generous ways, about how and why she wrote *Late in the Day*, made the evening a particularly memorable event.

Tessa Hadley's exquisite prose style has often been likened to Alice Munro, Elizabeth Strout and Anne Tyler and Hadley herself has been quoted as saying that Munro's stories gave her a 'sense of permission' to write as herself and about the world she knew. Tessa spoke movingly of writing scenes where she tried to find the right balance of words to create life on the page and emotions in the reader. It is this careful attention to words, and ways in which writing can articulate emotional experience that makes her work so attractive to both writers and readers.

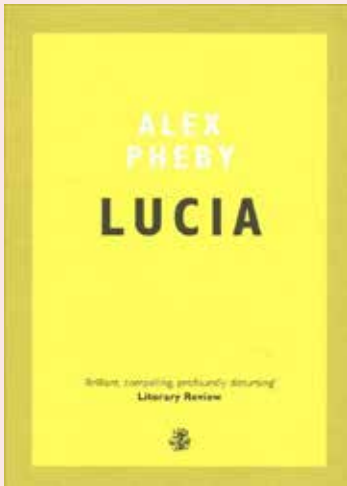
[Tessa Hadley appeared on May 16 2019]

alex pheby

BY GILL LOWE

In June, Alex Pheby spoke to an attentive audience about *Lucia* (2018), his most recent book, which focuses on James

Joyce's troubled and troubling daughter. Alex said he wanted to 'piece together' the character whose story had been 'erased by men'. Lucia was a gifted professional eurhythmic dancer, appearing in Jean Renoir's 'The Little Match Girl' ballet, filmed in 1927, before she was incarcerated. Mental health runs through Alex Pheby's fiction. *Grace* (2009) is set in a secure asylum; Alex's 'PhD novel', *Playthings* (2015), 'arguably the best neuronovel ever written' (*Literary Review*), concerns the true case of a paranoid schizophrenic.



Alex was drawn to Lucia's tragic story having discovered her medical records were suppressed and that Stephen Joyce, her nephew, had burned all her correspondence with James Joyce and with Samuel Beckett. Alex was advised not to write Lucia's story but this proved 'a red rag to a bull': a motivator, in effect. The destroyed records constituted, he said, 'a deliberate act of erasure', opening up space for biofictional speculation.

Historical documentation reveals that, at the behest of her family, Lucia (1907-1982) was confined in several psychiatric institutions. She was injected with barbiturates, seawater and serum concocted from bovine foetuses. Her teeth were removed; she was subjected to brutal hydrotherapy regimes. She died, after spending thirty years in St Andrews' Hospital, Northamptonshire. Beckett, once her lover, sent birthday presents, the last arriving after her death.

Alex maps how Lucia was adversely affected and abused by men: James Joyce; her brother, Giorgio; the Joyce estate; her lovers and the medical fraternity. Alex realises the problematic issues raised by his bold project. He remarked that we 'animate and parade the dead like puppets in ways that can't be ethical' but, concurrently, this was 'gruelling empathetic work'. Lucia was like a dark-edged silhouette; Alex aspired to understand why truths about her had been hidden. Paralleling this objective he prefaces each section with fragments regarding the archaeological dissection of a woman embalmed in an Egyptian sarcophagus.

[Alex Pheby appeared on June 10 2019]

alex pheby's recommended reads

Ducks, Newburyport

by Lucy Ellmann

Lucy's annoyed millionaire, TV serialised crime writers across the globe by saying in the *Guardian* that crime fiction is overrated. Apparently, they're all terribly victimised by the existence of books that are better reviewed in the *Financial Times* than they are, and Twitter agrees with them. Looking forward to seeing Robson Green in a long running BBC adaptation of *Ducks, Newburyport*, but not holding my breath. Lucy's book is a brilliant, state of the nation (USA) doorstep that you have to read (or you'll look like an idiot who agrees with the Twitter boycott). It's 1000 pages long.

The Alarming Palsy of James Orr

by Tom Lee

This is only about 150 pages and the margins are massive, so I'd say it's as long as about 50 pages of *Ducks, Newburyport*. It's not 200 times less good though, so it represents good value for your readerly minute. It's about a man whose life changes after he wakes up with half of his face drooping. Tom's prose is great and the story is anxiously compelling. Well worth reading.

The Doll's Alphabet

by Camilla Grudova

Another shorter one, and short stories too. These are creepy and odd and hauntingly puzzling. The atmospheres are troubling and surrealist without being whimsical. A disconcerting and unsettling collection.

Plastic Emotions

by Shiromi Pinto

A fictional biography of Minnette de Silva, the Sri Lankan architect. Brilliantly written and narratively fascinating, you can learn about this overlooked figure while revelling in the writing.

Encyclopaedia of St Arbuc

by Paul Stanbridge

Impossible to describe this. You'll just have to read it. It's online here:

http://www.headphonesoff.com/arbuckswiki/Encyclopaedia_of_St_Arbuc

haydn middleton

BY KEITH JONES



The Ipswich Institute's very own Dave Stainer began the evening with a surprise performance of Syd Barrett's 1970 song 'Terrapin'. After that, we hardly knew what to expect. We got, in the event, a reading and a meditation on an unlikely imaginary conversation between two people whom Haydn Middleton admires deeply. He pictures it taking place in 1968 between E. M. Forster, then living in indolent retirement in King's, Cambridge, and an abruptly intruding Syd Barrett, who'd been so

famously dumped by Pink Floyd. Well, Forster would hardly have objected to being intruded on by such a pretty young man as Barrett, and it's true that both men were living in Cambridge at the time. And Haydn Middleton studied each diligently enough to concoct a conversation as the heart of his novel *The Ballad of Syd and Morgan* (Propolis 2018). So maybe it's not wholly impossible to suspend disbelief.



What these two discuss, in Haydn's novel, is the problem of being creative. Syd complains of his inability to produce more songs. The venerable novelist has produced no published fiction since 1924, so might be presumed to understand the predicament. Syd will later become silent for just as long. For the successful act of creation, whether in psychedelic pop or the novel, involves a mystery. You can have all the sheer skill in the world, but if you do not succeed in letting down your bucket into the depth of experience and there receiving the inspiration of the god Pan, you will wait in vain. That reference to Pan comes from Kenneth Graham's *The Wind in the Willows*, which they discuss in the novel. It is the central theme of the novel.

Quite why E. M. Forster stopped writing novels so early in his life, and why Syd Barrett became a silent recluse for so long, is matter in each case for speculation. Haydn related the problem to himself, for having gained a high reputation as a historian, a biographer and as an author for young people (the Mordred Cycle for example) he confessed to having stalled since 1999 on his novel which he calls 'The White Island'. Now, however, he senses a way forward. Perhaps *The Ballad of Syd and Morgan* helped to fill his own bucket with the right blend of personal experience and mysterious genius.

Tantalisingly, Haydn remarked that we would not want to know more about the genesis of his other works. I for one longed to relate this quixotic book with the impressive body of work by which he has delighted so many. His ability to convey the mystery in things, the hidden

messages behind the muddle of the world, the perennial delight we all have in fantasy: these gifts are not far from this, his latest novel. Perhaps there is a clue here to why Forster, and why Syd Barrett, are so pleasing to so many.

[Haydn Middleton appeared on July 11 2019]



haydn middleton's recommended reads

Like most people, I'm in awe of books that get me to look differently at the world, but I find very little contemporary fiction has this effect on me (though from the literary industry's wearisome hype and over-praise, you'd imagine almost every book pulls it off!), so I tend to look more to historical works for my wake-up calls.

Promise Me You'll Shoot Yourself

by Florian Huber

Subtitled *The Downfall of Ordinary Germans in 1945*, this is a new and staggering account of a 'suicide epidemic' which I for one had previously been unfamiliar with.

The Eleanor Crosses

by Decca Warrington

Subtitled *The Story of Edward I's Lost Queen and her Architectural Legacy*, my partner's book came out last year and tells the highly-accessible and emotionally-charged tale of this set of monuments, effectively serving up England's history in microcosm over a period of seven centuries.

Reality Is Not What It Seems (The Journey Into Quantum Gravity)

By Carlo Rovelli

Physicist Carlo Rovelli's superbly persuasive book from 2016 made me realise once and for all that any formal distinction between 'the arts' and 'the sciences' is a nonsense.

Never Let Me Go

By Kazuo Ishiguro

One novelist for whom in my opinion the hype and over-praise are justified is Kazuo Ishiguro, whose *Never Let Me Go* I recently re-read. The way he writes about something unthinkable in deliberately everyday language moved me all over again.

Arrival and Exhalation

By Ted Chiang

A newer, possibly less well-known author of fiction, Ted Chiang, pushes imaginative boundaries in different ways in these two short story collections, the latter of which I'm currently reading. Very little of what he writes could ever meaningfully be given the big-screen treatment, which I happen to regard as a plus!

answers to quiz from issue 172

moon by latymer

There were no winners for this quiz.

1. Who is the little girl mentioned in the title of a Ted Hughes moon poem?
 - Frieda
2. Which Tolkien novella tells of a dog who flies to the moon?
 - Roverandom
3. What name links a 1928 ballet, Joseph Conrad's father, and NASA?
 - Apollo
4. Whose autobiography was *The Moon's a Balloon*?
 - David Niven
5. Who wrote a celebrated short story entitled *La Distanza Della Luna*?
 - Italo Calvino
6. Which book of the bible talks of bringing 'no more... new moons and sabbaths'?
 - Isaiah
7. From which fictional country do Tintin and Captain Haddock fly to the moon?
 - Syldavia
8. Which painter's life inspired Maugham's *The Moon and Sixpence*?
 - Paul Gauguin
9. Toni Morrison, Zane Grey and Neil Armstrong were all born in which US state?
 - Ohio
10. What name is shared by a power station, a Dorset MP, and a Moonraker villain?
 - Drax
11. Which minister wrote that 'moons shall wax and wane no more'?
 - Isaac Watts
12. Which US diplomat wrote *The Conquest of the Earth by the Moon* in 1809?
 - Washington Irving
13. Whose 1906 poem paints the moon as 'a ghostly galleon'?
 - Alfred Noyes

We can read from top to bottom to find Francis Godwin, English bishop and author of *The Man in the Moone*, considered to be one of the earliest works of science fiction.

quiz questions

walls by latymer

It's 30 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Let's celebrate that anniversary with an appropriately themed quiz.

1. Who is the narrator of H. G. Wells' *The Door in the Wall*?
2. Bruce Chatwin's *Black Hill* is located near which 8th century border wall?
3. Which eponymous character from 1853 experiences 'deal wall revelries'?
4. What bird is named in the title of a 1954 adventure novel involving Hadrian's Wall?
5. In a 1920s Lovecraft short story, the protagonist hears what animal in the walls?
6. What is the occupation of the character who plays the wall in a Shakespeare play?
7. Which character is chained to a wall and bricked up in an 1846 short story?
8. Who directed the 1967 film version of Sartre's short story, 'The Wall'?
9. A large mural on Southwold pier depicts which author?
10. Which 1990s fantasy novel is set in a rural village named Wall?
11. According to Swift, hedges have ears and walls have what?

Reading from top to bottom, the first letter of each answer should give you the name of a poet who wrote a well-known thematically linked poem.

NB Names of authors, poets, etc. are surnames unless otherwise stated.

Good luck!

See back cover for the answers.

our community's department store: the future of the public library

BY KEITH JONES

Addiction to books can begin early in life. Before television dominated the living room, reading books was one of children's main ways into the wider world. We travelled there by curling up in the solitude of an armchair, and turning pages with frozen fingers in unheated bedrooms. And the Public Library was where we got our books from. The solid civic building represented the nurturing, educating state. The ritual of ticket (maybe the fine) and date-stamp, the hush of the reading room (malodorous with shabby old men), and the treasure haul of books were a liturgy of exploration.

It's not the same now. The Ipswich Library in Northgate St, one of those endowed by Carnegie, is still one of the

town's noblest buildings. Some years ago Libraries ceased to be a County responsibility and 'Suffolk Libraries' was set up as a separate provider of services, a sort of co-operative, a charity to do whatever it is that libraries should now do. The present Chief Executive, Bruce Leeke, has been in charge for a year and is charged with furthering the right changes. There are 44 branches, providing a free service; there is a mobile library service making 1000 stops p.a., and a service to three prisons in Suffolk. It was in Northgate St Library in Ipswich that I went to meet Bruce and we talked about the role of libraries in modern society, and about the future of the book in general.

There are still three million books lent per year, so reading is popular. One deep change for libraries has been caused by the rise of digital access to what we want to read. And then there is Amazon, winging books and everything else to your door. These factors have changed the whole book business. Then there is the poverty of local authorities, whose funding has already been pruned drastically. So, while there are no plans to close the Ipswich library in Northgate St, even this place is seeing change. 'Once, the experience of going to the library was a sort of transaction at a desk. Now it's experiencing new possibilities which can engage you.' Many libraries do far more than provide books. They are homes to multiple activities, from motorbike maintenance to sewing groups to reading groups. For lonely people in country and town, the library is of major importance. No longer sanctuaries of silence, libraries are generators of communal life.

At least they should be. Bruce acknowledges that the traditional image of libraries can be a problem. Grand woodwork can imply that such places are not for the likes of you, while shortage of funds can make for grimy carpets and battered fittings. Modern library services can now be provided with fewer staff, and the staff do not need to be the sort who have read all the books but rather point us to search through the screens we can see all around us. 'The experience of the customer', says Bruce, 'is where we have to start.' Many of those customers are children and their parents, and the Summer Reading Challenge has been a typical success. 'Click and Collect' is used by more

and more of the people who visit the Northgate library.

Bruce sees it important to keep Libraries local in feel, and with good interaction with what people want. A team of three work constantly to source books, and can order books on demand from further afield than Suffolk. Every library has a community group and values (what business does not?) feedback.

Prophecies of the end of the book have so far been wrong. They remain a fundamental reason why libraries for the public are there. Bruce and his team at Suffolk Libraries hope that their strategy of making libraries central to local life will succeed.



Bruce Leeke

suffolk libraries celebration



BY JAMES POWELL

The first ever Suffolk Libraries Day will take place on Saturday 12 October 2019, at the end of National Libraries Week. Special events will be taking place at all 44 of our libraries, with the aim of showcasing everything libraries have to offer the community. The day will also raise funds to support the county's library service.

During the week leading up to Suffolk Libraries Day a Book Journey Challenge will also take place, with Suffolk businesses coming together to get the book from Bungay to Haverhill, visiting all the county's libraries in between. The book will cover a total distance of 323.9 miles with companies sponsoring each leg and transporting the book in a range of quirky and inventive ways including an American muscle car, a tractor, tandem and vintage coach. The chosen book for the Book Journey is *The Huntingfield Paintress* a historical fiction novel by Pamela Holmes which is set in Suffolk.

Many major Suffolk companies have signed up so far, including Adhams, Ipswich Buses, Hughes, Care UK, EO,

East of England Co-op, Exterion Media, Scarlett and Mustard, Ryan's insurance and Realise Futures.

Bruce Leeke, CEO of Suffolk Libraries, said: 'Suffolk Libraries Day will be a fantastic opportunity to highlight the huge impact our libraries have on making Suffolk such a great place to live. All our libraries are thriving community hubs that are there for everyone. The exciting diversity of our offer continues to drive people to our sites, especially for events and activities.'

Suffolk Libraries is a charity which was launched to run Suffolk's library service in August 2012. Seven years on, all 44 libraries continue to be focal points for the local community. Highlighting this, over the past four years the number and range of events and activities in libraries has increased, with the number of people attending them rising by 29%. Suffolk Libraries also runs a mobile library service, two pop-up library services and the county's prison libraries.

Bruce added: 'Our success story is down to the hard work of our



staff and people in the community who continue to support us and champion our libraries. Suffolk Libraries Day will raise awareness that we are a charity and need to raise more income as we're likely to face many challenges in the future. We've had some great support for the Book Journey already and there'll be lots of opportunities for local people to get involved in Suffolk Libraries Day events, so if you have any ideas or want to support us please get in touch.'

Pamela Holmes, author of *The Huntingfield Paintress*, said: 'I was thrilled that my book was chosen to be part of the Book Journey. I went to school in Suffolk and have given talks in several of the lovely local libraries in the county so I'm very proud to support this campaign to highlight the value of libraries to their communities.'

Ashley Shorey-Mills, general manager of Hughes Smart, said: 'Hughes are supporting the Suffolk Libraries Day book journey because we feel as a Suffolk company who started out in Lowestoft nearly 100 years ago, we need to support our local services. The work Suffolk Libraries do in engaging with their local communities and offering services that go way beyond just books is fantastic, and so when we heard about

this event, we knew we wanted to be involved as much as we could. Suffolk is an incredible place, and it's going to be amazing to see the support from the people of Suffolk as this book travels across the county.'

Andy Wood, CEO of Adnams PLC, added: 'The writer Sidney Sheldon once wrote that Libraries store the energy that fuels the imagination. They open up windows to the world and inspire us to explore and achieve, and contribute to improving our quality of life. We totally agree and this is why we are proud to support Suffolk Libraries Day and the other great initiatives which support learning through our Adnams Community Trust.'

Suffolk Libraries Day activities across the county confirmed so far include a sponsored readathon at a local school, a children's disco, a sponsored walk/bike ride between Saxmundham, Leiston and Aldeburgh libraries, a photography competition, a Lego building session and a battle of the bands event. If you'd like to find out more or get involved, email suffolklibrariesday@suffolklibraries.co.uk [James Powell is Marketing and Communications Manager at Suffolk Libraries]

two suffolk based authors and librarians

BY JEFF TAYLOR



East Anglian born Children's Stock Librarian Sophie Green writes children's fiction. Her short stories have been highly commended for the Bridport Prize, longlisted for BBC Opening Lines in 2013 and 2015 and won second prize in Words with Jam in 2014.

Her first novel, *The Last Giant*, was shortlisted for the Times/Chicken House Children's Fiction Competition and her second *Potkin and Stubbs* was published in March 2019. *The Haunting of Peligan City*, described by Sophie as 'atmospheric, spooky, warm at heart' was released at the beginning of this month and is the second book in the *Potkin and Stubbs* 'hardboiled detective trilogy for readers aged 9+'.

Suffolk born Library and Information Advisor Francesca Armour-Chelu also writes children's fiction. Her novel *Fenn Halflin and the Fearzero*, published in 2016, was inspired by her experience of living on water meadows in an abandoned Edwardian railway carriage. It was short listed for Mal Peet 2016 East Anglian Children's Book Award and long-listed for the East Angle Literary Prize in 2017. *Fenn Halflin and the Seaborn* the thrilling conclusion to the two book series was published in 2017 and again short-listed for the Mal Peet 2016 East Anglian Children's Book Award. The novels touch on the very topical themes of immigration and the environment.

Francesca's most recent novel *The Butterfly Circus* was published in June this year.





haverscroft

REVIEWED BY JEFF TAYLOR

The author, S.A.Harris, is a solicitor based in Norwich and this is her debut novel. The author tells me that it is 'partly inspired by Norfolk, and partly, Suffolk. The church and around that area in the story is Norfolk, the village and high street, Suffolk.'

Kate Keeling, an unemployed solicitor recovering from a nervous breakdown, moves out of London with Mark, her barrister husband and 9-year-old twins, Tom and Sophie, to live in Haverscroft House, a decaying property on the edge of a village

called Weldon. The novel covers the first month of their occupancy of the house. Mark is mostly working away so Kate is the one who has to deal with the 'dark secrets' which come with the ownership of the house.

Kate's first-person narrative drives the story from the start and I was on her side throughout. I can't imagine any reader not being full of concern and compassion for her situation. It is a psychological thriller, with a supernatural edge, that worked for me because of the fine balance between

tense cliff-edge chapters and others which provide time for the reader to be more thoughtful. A rhythm which clearly reflects the changes in Kate's disposition. I also like the fact that the author appears not to be trying too hard in her descriptions of people and places. No obvious pretension. Often matter-of-fact but lyrical where necessary. Another fine balance.

I do have a couple of quibbles about *Haverscroft*. The first is to do with sense of place, a particular interest of mine. I didn't get a real image of the house in my mind which is a shame as it is a major character in the novel. It is certainly big, detached in its own extensive grounds. One character describes it as a 'big old house' though another compares it to other 'large country piles' which sounds bigger than just big. It has Victorian tiles but is not obviously Victorian. Could be earlier. It is described as 'red-brick' but the stock photo on the front and back cover is of a stone-built house. A little confused.

Also, where is the tale set? Lesley Dolphin of Radio Suffolk, while interviewing the author recently, plainly wanted it to be on the Suffolk coast even though there is no mention of any county. Weldon is within traveling distance of Colchester, Cambridge and Essex, as one of the characters comments and there are also references to the *East Anglian Daily Times* so it probably is set in Suffolk.

However, I like my sense of place to be either grounded or not. This seems to be somewhere in between.

My other quibble is not to do with the writing but with the publishing. I was surprised by coming across a fair number of typographical errors - some quite glaring.

On the whole these quibbles don't detract from a well written debut novel which reminded me in places of Daphne du Maurier, an author which I later discovered was one of the author's favourite writers. So, don't look now, but the author is working on her next novel which is going to be a 'supernatural tale set on the Suffolk coast'. Something to look forward to.



S. A. Harris

wakenhyrst

REVIEWED BY JOHN ELLISON

The introductory special moment of this novel is a violent death (ice-pick to the head) in the year 1913 and in a Suffolk village (the author prefers the term 'hamlet'). For this brutal act a respected and mysticism-obsessed landowner, Edmund Stearne, was convicted and asylumed for the remainder of his life.

But did he do it? His 16-year-old daughter, Maud, had told the court she had seen him, ice-pick in hand, set about the victim in the orchard. Had she lied?

'Yes', half a century later, alleges a journalist fulsomely guilty of sensational Sunday journalism and of writing a book pointing to Maud as the murderer. She, in 1966, is a close-mouthed spinster recluse approaching her seventieth year. Public interest in the case had soared due to the discovery of three archived and astonishing paintings by her father in captivity – all featuring a woman surrounded by malevolent little monsters – devils – bringing the work of a certain fifteenth century Mr Hieronymus Bosch to mind.

Angered by the 'preposterous' journalistic expose, Maud Stearne is ready to tell her story. It begins with her childhood, from which sweetness and light are largely absent. Present instead are her father's fiercely comprehensive domestic despotism, and her mother's annual pregnancies, most ending badly.

Maud faces thrashings for the smallest crimes. She cannot be unaffected by the superstitious beliefs of house

servants. Her world is one in which an owl is as much a messenger as a bird, in which the undrained fen nearby is a place of spirits and danger, and the images of devils decorating the parish church are much in her head. A reader might see this emerging narrative as exceedingly grim soup.

But the book's atmosphere changes and the soup becomes less grim. Maud's unfortunate mother dies, Mr Edmund Stearne's exercise of authority inexplicably becomes less brutally oppressive, and the fen, for Maud, becomes a friendlier place. Precocious, before long she becomes her father's secretary. More mysteries wake up. While Edmund Stearne for his own reasons pursues research about a sin-tormented woman from the Bosch era, Maud pursues her own investigation into the origins of her father's guilty feelings about his own past, through clandestine recourse to his diary.

So, what was Maud's role in the ice-pick murder of 1913? A satisfying answer is supplied before the end.





Photo By Simon Knott

the wenhaston doom

BY SIMON KNOTT

[The three paintings by Edmund Stearne in Michelle Paver's *Wakenhyrst* resembled the 'Wakenhyrst Doom' which he had discovered in the local parish church in 1911 and which is based on the real-life Wenhaston Doom found under whitewash in the 1890s. It is described here by Simon Knott author of the website www.suffolkchurches.co.uk/]

England's medieval churches contain many treasures which we would willingly travel down to London to see if they were in the Victoria and Albert Museum. But here they are, scattered across the land in ancient buildings sitting in villages and hamlets and among the fields. Among the most extraordinary survivals here in Suffolk is the Wenhaston Doom.

A Doom painting depicts the Last Judgement, the occasion on which some Christians believe Christ will return to judge humankind. This event, suggested at several points in the Bible, was understood by late medieval people to be a sorting of those souls who would enter Heaven, and those whose fate was to end up in Hell. In the years before the Reformation many churches put an often-lurid depiction of the Last Judgement above their chancel arch as a foil to the rood, a sculpture of the crucifixion. The Wenhaston Doom was painted on boards in the first decades of the 16th Century. Within forty years it had been whitewashed by the protestant reformers. In the mid-19th Century the boards were taken down by restorers and abandoned in the churchyard to be burnt. However, that night it rained, washing away the covering and revealing wonderful things. In vivid

colours, angels sound the last trump, and the dead rise from their graves. Christ sits on a rainbow, overseeing everything. His mother and St John the Baptist bring forward prayers for the souls of the dead. However, the real battle is between St Michael and the Devil, who have charge of the scales, and weigh each soul against its unreconciled sins.

St Peter is seen receiving nobility. We can tell from their headgear that they include royalty, a bishop and a cardinal, but they are otherwise naked, to signify to the medieval faithful that all are equal before God. To the left, souls are received through a narrow gate into Heaven, while those on the right are marched off to Hell, dragged into its jaws by demons with chains.

This fabulous art object is now on display in the north aisle of Wenhaston church, not far from Blythburgh. The church is open every day.

Wenhaston Church



Photo By Simon Knott



student new angle prize 2019

The winner of the Student New Angle Prize for 2019 was announced in March. University of Suffolk BA (Hons) English student Lucy Tate won the top prize for her piece 'Balkerne Blues' while the runner up prize was awarded to fellow BA (Hons) English student, Amy Gillingham, for 'The Kingdom of the East Angles'.



Lucy Tate (Left) Amy Gillingham (Right)

The competition is now in its fifth year and runs in conjunction with the New Angle Prize, which started in 2009. Students were asked to write about something that has an East Anglian connection which could be a theme, topic, influence or association.

We are grateful to Lucy for permission to print 'Balkerne Blues' in full here.

Balkerne Blues

I've been sat here for almost three hours now, thinking, contemplating really. How easy would it be? The flow of cars is steady, never a moment that there ceases to be a rev of an engine ringing in my ears. Not that I'm paying any attention to it.

All I can really see is that stupid gate.

The Roman walls, with Roman bricks, and the people too – I see them. Slaves and soldiers alike, all pulling together, placing each rock, each stone, each piece with care. Or maybe it's fear. I can't tell the difference anymore.

All I know is that I see them, the Celts, the Iceni tribe, Boudicca. That's what he used to call me, you see, on account of my fiery hair and even more fiery resolve. I used to think of myself that way, a fire, burning day and night to get my way. I could've taken down houses, towns, even cities with my passion – all hail Boudicca, risen again!

Now I know.

I know that my fire is gone, I can barely take on my own mind, let alone an empire. No. I am far more like these Roman walls, sturdy for what feels like centuries, but if you look closer, if you really cared enough to look, what would you see?

An archway, an empty gaping hole. Misshapen rocks, barely holding themselves together, teetering on the very edge of their time here, ready and so willing to let it all fall away. You'd see a patchwork job, bits of new concrete,

no heart, no soul, a poor replica of what a Roman wall should be. There are parts that have crumbled completely. Buckled under the pressure. Why is there so much pressure? Do people not understand that a Roman wall was not meant to withstand this?

Roman walls were not built for big, clumpy combat boots or stiletto heels. They were not built for huge signs and banners to advertise its historical worth. They were not built for school trips, or spilt lunches, or snazzy photos for your Instagram. Not for tourist shops, or staging plays, or leaning on while you wait. Not for climbing, or jumping, or running, or posing. Roman walls were not built for you to step on, or laugh at, or gawp and throw stones at.

These bricks and stones were made for so much more: they endure. Come hell or high-water, they endure. Come peace or raging war, they endure. Come tribes and weapons and hatred and hardship, they endure. They endure, they endure, they endure, they endure. So maybe, just maybe, I am made for something more!

martin crook

(1936-2019)

BY ANNE PARRY

Martin, who died earlier this year, was the earliest keen volunteer to the Suffolk Book League Committee. At the first public meeting when volunteers were requested he came straight up to do so, and remained on the committee for many years, succeeding Peter Labdon as secretary.

I think one thing Martin is remembered for is his magnificent Second Hand Book Sales in the Corn Exchange, raising thousands of pounds for charity. They were under the aegis of the SBL giving us much needed promotion at the time, and I remember many happy hours spent there: as a volunteer you were allowed in early to have first pick! They were an enormous amount of work for Martin who spent months collecting the books, sorting them and storing them in his garage.

Martin had an amazing knowledge of books – the physical shape, size, edition and when in print. I once mentioned George Ewart Evans and he disappeared into his study and came back with editions of titles long out of print, at the time. Although his working

life had been in Insurance, once he retired he allowed his bibliophile enthusiasm to take over. At one time he and his first wife Betty ran the second hand book shop in Eye, which was a very happy time.

In his last years, after Betty died, he suffered from health problems which he endured cheerfully and stoically. He married Kate (also on the early SBL committee as the representative of the Suffolk Poetry Society) and was very, very happy. In 2015 he saw a consultant at Papworth Hospital who later wrote 'Yesterday I had the pleasure of seeing a delightful man.' Exactly how Martin appeared to everyone..

from the archive

Following on from Anne Parry's appreciation of Martin Crook the following is the first piece that Martin wrote for BookTalk and which appeared in issue 15 December 1984.

AUTUMN BOOK FAIR AND SALE

I would like to take the opportunity of thanking all members who contributed towards the success of this event – whether by helping on the Friday or Saturday, or by donating books. I think it is fair to say that it was far more successful than any of the committee members anticipated, and it has enabled us collectively to do what we set out to do, i.e. make both a positive contribution towards supporting a local appeal with which we could all identify, and project ISBL [Ipswich and Suffolk Book League] within the community in support of its primary aim – the promotion of books and reading.

At the time of writing this note, the final accounting position has not been determined as unsold books still have to be cleared. An interim cheque for £700 has, however, been passed to the Hospice Appeal, and after specific expenses (primarily hall hire and advertising) and a small retention towards our own general working expenses have been deducted, it is anticipated that the final figure passed to the Appeal will be in excess of £750.'

Martin was soon busy organising the next Book Fair as is shown in this piece

from issue 17 of BookTalk which came out in April of the following year.

'Following the success of last year's event, when we were able to pass £750 over to the Hospice Appeal, the committee has decided to repeat the Book Fair in 1985. Later in the year we shall ask for members' help to provide material, and to help on the day, but you should please note Saturday, the 2nd November, in your diary now.

In the meantime, if you know of any friend or neighbour moving house, or having books to dispose of for any other reason, please bear the event in mind. The ISBL can arrange collection – please contact Martin Crook ...

The main problem last year lay in finding sufficient storage accommodation prior to the event, and if anyone knows of a spare ground floor room or garage (must be dry, of course) in Ipswich, I should like to know about it.'

suffolk book league events

october to december 2019

Mark Cocker

Thursday 10 October

Mark Cocker is a British author, naturalist, journalist and lecturer. His eight books have dealt with modern responses to the wild, whether found in landscape, human societies or in other species. His latest book, *Our Place*, is about humans' effect on wildlife.

Fiona Sampson

Thursday 14 November

Fiona Sampson is an internationally acclaimed scholar, editor, poet, biographer and translator as well as a musician. *Common Prayer* and *Rough Music* were shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize. *In Search of Mary Shelley*, *The Girl Who Wrote Frankenstein* was released 200 years after the publication of Frankenstein in 2018.

Sir Nicholas Young

Wednesday 11 December

Sir Nicholas Young was, until 2014, CEO of the British Red Cross. Escaping with his Life tells the story of his father's WW2 experiences at Dunkirk, in the Commandos, and in North Africa, and then his escape from an Italian POW camp. His book is a labour of love, an adventure story and a sign of gratitude to the Italian people who risked their lives to help during the escape.

If you would like to reserve a seat please email the SBL Membership Secretary on tickets@sbl.org who will then be in touch. You will pay for any reserved seats by cash on the door and they must be claimed fifteen minutes before the start of an event.

**These events will be held at the
Ipswich Institute Reading Room, 15 Tavern Street, Ipswich IP1 3AA**

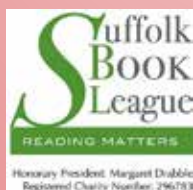
Doors open 7.00pm. Events start 7.30pm.

£4 for members. £8 for non-members. Students FREE with ID.

Answers to the quiz 'walls' on page 9.

1. Redmond 2. Offa's Dyke 3. Bartleby 4. Eagle 5. Rats 6. Tinker
7. Fortunato 8. Roullet 9. Orwell 10. Stardust 11. Tongues

Reading from 1 to 11 gives the answer Robert Frost who wrote 'Mending Wall' published in 1914.



Issue 173

Designed and Printed by
Printing for Pleasure Ltd

01473 652354

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