Moomins, Monsters and Macrobiotics: an interview with Sarah Cave

Poet Sarah Cave is currently studying for a PhD at Royal Holloway. She has two new books published this year, *like fragile clay* from Guillemot Press, and *An Arbitrary Line* from Broken Sleep Books.

Rupert Loydell: *Would it be fair to say a lot of your poems are obsessive in that they deal with your own thematic or individual obsessions often in a kind of weird hybridity or juxtaposition. I'm thinking polar bears, saints and hermits, ducks and bishops, Moomins, Italy and Pussy Riot here! Not to mention the Thunderbirds (original series, of course) picture of John Tracey on your website.*

Sarah Cave: There’s an element of working in sequences that could be described as obsessive, the subject unfolding gradually over many pages with repeated characters and themes. When I have a slew of poems that work around one subject writing starts to feel like a crochet hook going in and out of the central ring. In my books I often have a loose narrative, which is used as a washing line on which to hang my abstract images. Sometimes people get their knickers in a twist about abstract writing and a narrative helps to move people from one image to the next.

I’m interested in hybridity and interconnections between text. I also enjoy the pop-culture anarchy that fan cross-overs promote. The sense that characters, stories, times and landscapes should be kept separate is all a bit too much like school and the class system for my liking.

As for John Tracey, he’s a space hermit and I like hermits. There’s something very identifiable in their struggle and desire to be alone and the absolute hard-wired need to scream one’s identity to others. I probably owe a creative debt here to Beckett whose work is nothing like mine but that sense of speaking nonsense into the void and the use of humour to mask horrible truths is. Another big influence is Chekhov, not only the sense of depression that runs through his work but also the desire to transcend form and place. I think Konstantin’s play at the beginning of *The Seagull* had a proto-influence on my poetry and I’m fully aware of the absurd meta-implication of that; the line between too much and not enough is hard to see when you’re intoxicated on language.

Which is why I love the absurdity of Pussy Riot. Their art-action in the Cathedral was so gloriously teenage, it was always going to divide people, but it was necessary; culturally, individually and internationally. I know the raw tension so well from my own youth. Being forced to sit in church and be solemn makes you want to stand and shout and sing. Perhaps the resulting language isn’t always very articulate, but the expression of the frustration is necessary for the protection of art, society and religion. There’s nothing worse than state sponsored solemnity.

RL: *I remember reading the original version of your poetry sequence which has now become* An Arbitrary Line. *It was, and still is, about Slava, who lives alone on the ice but also has a shamanistic spirit life as well. You included maps and diagrams, along with material reworked from actual reports from polar expeditions.*

SC: I loved writing and structuring something bigger. *An Arbitrary Line,* at that stage, could have been a novel, radio-play or short story sequence and to some degree it combines those modes of writing in its final collection form (due out November 31st from Broken Sleep Books).

*An Arbitrary Line* is a diverse collection of responses to the eschaton, before and after, and how humanity might deal with the raw conditions of need and lack of social contact. The google maps show how limited (but also creative) the satellite mapping of our world is and the found poems in the book express the lack of connection between remote places.

I’ve always been interested in the eschaton. When I was little the end-of-days appeared in many guises both at church and home, the theological and the ecological, it’s part of my imaginative landscape. The feeling of desire and dread permeates the event and that tension between the parallel and conflicting narratives fascinates me.

RL: *In conversation and reflective writing at the time you somehow linked all that to the obscure minimalist poet Robert Lax and ecology! How did that work?*

SC: Lots of things connect Robert Lax to *An Arbitrary Line*.

Just finishing off my trail of thought from above, the eschaton was predicted from the island that Lax finally chose to settle on by St John the Divine from the Cave of the Apocalypse. Slava isn’t based on Lax but there are undercurrents of the poet’s writing/artistic process. I was also bored of certain types of nature writing and wanted to focus on Lax’s minimalism and performative practice. Lax can evoke a sense of place in only a few syllables and I was fascinated by how he uses his slow repetitive technique to look even further into the fabric of the world.

‘one stone’ is a perfect poem.

Lax is the ‘one stone’ bee’s knees.

My Lax research led me to all sorts of theological and hagiographical texts and that’s what *An Arbitrary Line* is; the hagiography of Slava.

I went on to write about Lax for my MA and he’s a significant part of my current PhD research.

RL: *The Slava sequence has been reworked and reshaped to become your Broken Sleep Book, yes? Lots of writers hate editing, but how was it for you?*

SC: I love editing. It’s a fundamental part of the writing process. Slava was a joy to edit. He spent two years in the sea of me and came out smooth and shiny like sea-glass.

RL: *You've previously studied philosophy, is that right? Did that help your writing or critical skills?*

SC: My critical skills have always been more creative and that hasn’t always worked out well for me. I have a real openness to experiment, but academia and creative writing feel very similar to me and that’s why I’m drawn to writers like Anne Carson and Milan Kundera. I mostly wrote plays and ‘poetic’ marginalia during my philosophy degree.

As a young person, I was very politically active from a pre-school age I was involved in environmental activism and my parents are both left-leaning. I could see from an early age that the world is systematically flawed and subsequently developed critical skills that allowed me to think my way out.

When I’m writing an essay, I live for those moments that are beautiful and elucidating. Again, an essay is a washing line on which to hang your abstract images, it’s just that the line is made of different rope.

RL: *You've performed your writing, alone and in a duo with the poet Anna Cathenka, and the two of you also produced a podcast series. How does that compare or sit with your own writing? Do you write for performance, or think about how to present work you've already written for the page? At one point you were reserved about performing, could you talk about your use of costume and puppets to help overcome (or bypass?) that?*

SC: I wanted to be an actor in my teens and did a lot of performance-based activities. I was a terrible exhibitionist at school. It got me in a lot of trouble.

I went to stage school for a bit but that was too musical focussed and, really, I wanted to do Shakespeare, although now I wish I had persevered and learnt how to tap dance on roller skates [Gene Kelly reference].

I’ve always been a clown but about 15 years ago I internalised a lot of those performance qualities. It has taken most of my twenties to re-shape myself and find an outlet for my creativity.

I’ve always been interested in the Avant Garde and my attempts at impromptu rhyme are laughable, so I was never going to be a ‘performance poet’. Studying Caroline Bergvall and other performance writers had a big impact on me.Adding theatrical elements to my performance is my way of performing writing. Also, I think that process of performing is highly poetic and as a performer/writer observing yours and others’ methods can be as beautiful as the end-product.

RL: *Tell us about your plans for your doctorate, and what you're currently reading and writing.*

SC: I’m currently writing about process poetry, poetic process, performance and prayer. All terms that need a lot of defining and refining. Current reading in this area includes a book of essays on George Oppen.

It’s a practice-based scholarship, so I’m also working towards a second collection. It’s exciting to set previous work aside and to begin something new.
In my spare time, I’m working on the final proof of *An Arbitrary Line*, publicising *like fragile clay* and finishing up a manuscript for another publisher.

For pleasure, I’m reading *The Albertine Workout*, *Give Dust a Tongue* and the new *PN Review*.

RL: *And finally, any words of wisdom for creative writers?*
SC: 1. Theory is good for the soul. A philosopher a day keeps the apathy away.
2. Never be afraid to follow an idea through to its most surreal ending.
3. Always communicate with people on public transport using a kazoo, duck whistle or cheese grater.

RL: Thank you for your time.

SC: You’re welcome.

(This interview first appeared, in a different form, online @Fal\_Writing)