

Self-Storage

Wish I Was Here, M. John Harrison (Serpent's Tail)

One of M. John Harrison's chapters in his 'anti-memoir' is called 'a character in your own fiction', although it seems that mostly Harrison is a character in his own allegedly non-fiction biography. Like the author's last book it works mostly by allusion and misdirection, mood and atmosphere, with a large amount of narrative jump-cuts and tangential self-reflection.

Harrison is all too aware of the perils of nostalgia and the danger of reading too much in to recalled moments, so he tends to present them and move on before commenting or interpreting. Sometimes he names versions of himself, so Map Boy is – unsurprisingly – obsessed with maps and places. Sometimes, episodes or stories are presented as dreams, whilst at other times there are brilliant satirical fictions mocking genre conventions and clichés, such as 'a fantasy in five volumes' where 'The Elf Queen, who's eaten nothing for a week but the wadding from Benzedrine inhalers, has sex with Cootchie Cootie in the back seat of his 1951 Fleetline, while Tolkien and C.S. Lewis look on in passive aggressive disavowal.'

Her husband, 'Eldrano the Elf Lord is wheeled to bed every night on a reinforced composite and titanium gurney' and recalls that 'the Queen left him a hundred years ago with her dwarf.' Later, after 'the Elf Queen's underjaw has thickened', and she plans some time away on her own, her dwarf 'knows that their relationship is over'. Soon after, there is the 'Last Transmission from the Deep Halls' and a disappointing tour of the palace, which 'turned out to be a stuffy, disappointing warren that just *reeked* of dogs.'

'Q: Do you identify as a science fiction writer? A: No, I identify nightly, or at least every second night or so, as someone who would like to be rusting under the Thames.'

Map Boy, or whoever Harrison decides to be on the page you choose to read, prefers the likes of William Burroughs, Thomas Pynchon and William Gibson to Muddled Earths. He is also inclined to try and keep the author out of his own writing as much as possible, although it appears to be him describing his cat, reading the letter from Dan Dare that turns out to actually be from Uncle Don, and pondering his own creative process. However, Harrison mostly keeps himself at a distance, observing and reporting as though he is a Martian watching Earth.

'Writers write to find out who they used to be, to predict who they might be next.'

But the question is 'Are we bored with this old future now? Have we read it all before?' Well, yes and no. Harrison's worlds can be vague and ethereal enough for us to have do the heavy lifting, to visualise and co-create the setting; or they can be surreal and difficult, or tentative and undefined. They can concentrate on the rockface itself as much as the

camaraderie of the climbers, or they can get lost navigating the dream archipelago or crossing the road to the corner shop. So no, Harrison's futures may be in the past, but they are not boring. Mostly because the future is still uncertain.

And so is the past. Is Harrison scared to tell us about it, or has his mind's Super-8 film of memory faded away or burnt up in the projector? Are these snapshots simply selections from the brain's photo album or all there is? Or maybe this a computer-generated experiment in biographical literature? Or is it just a story about a storyteller by a storyteller? 'Even when you've forgotten them you've remembered them.'

And so is the present, a world where the writer loses notebooks and discusses creativity, inspiration, writer's block, fiction and reality. He watches the birds in the garden, the rain falling, then sits in the dark until the electricity comes back on and the computer restarts and then reconnects to the web:

'What am I like, someone on the internet wants to know, in real life? A bit stiff in the joints. Not a fiction. Always walking away from myself.'

It is quite a feat, this walking away whilst pretending to walk towards himself, and an even greater feat to walk away from the reader at the same time as pretending to offer up himself. It's all done with smoke and mirrors, lies and sleight of hand. Language. Words. But Harrison won't get away with it for ever.

'One day soon I'll walk through a door, begin to say something, then get a surprised expression on my face and fall over dead in front of everybody.'

Until then, Harrison is 'interested less in the future than the deflation and melancholy of the people the future leaves behind.' *Wish I Was Here* is Harrison's contribution to what will remain, a self-deflating, melancholic, hilarious and provocative self-invention. This book is old school experiment, several unrelated episodes from a literary reality show, a kind of negative biography with a big author-shaped hole in the middle waiting for the reader to fill based on all the evidence around it. It's also one of the best books I've read so far this year.

Rupert Loydell

(864 words)