

the Edinburgh International Book Festival – Ghost ships and Nature's Power



Top author Rebecca Hunt's gripping novel 'Everland' relates the story of two Antarctic Expeditions.

One is the tragic tale of a failed expedition of 1913, the members of which have now passed into legend, and an anniversary expedition which takes place in 2013. The parallel tales, a century apart, portray the building tensions between the characters of each expedition as they battle against the enormity of nature in this unforgiving and hostile environment.

In many ways the hostility of nature is the main protagonist, and Hunt's descriptions of the bleakness of the landscape and the terror of the travellers are vivid. She read from her book painting a picture of the moments where the 1913 expedition members fear for their lives as "Waves rose into unfathomable masses." It seems that they will drown in their small boat but unexpectedly they survive the storm. The psychological state of mind of the main character is revealed as instead of being joyful at their reprieve he relates "Preparing the soul for annihilation is hard enough, and all we were rewarded with a miracle."

She described how "hope became a filthy secret" as it seemed unlikely they could return to safety. The modern expedition, although they have the benefits of modern technology, have the same physical and psychological battles to contend with and tensions inevitably run high as their situation becomes more and more perilous.

The theme of man's battle with nature within historical fiction was carried on by author Valerie Martin.

Valerie Martin's book "The Ghost of the Mary Celeste" is a multi-faceted retelling of the well-known story of the mysterious ship. In 1872 the eponymous merchant ship turned up off the coast of the Azores. The ship was deserted, with no sign of the ten souls who were known to have been aboard, including the Captain Benjamin Briggs and his wife and daughter. There was no sign of violence, storm damage or sickness, and this mystery has haunted and tantalised over the intervening years. Famously, Arthur Conan Doyle became fascinated with this mystery too, producing a fictionalised account for Cornhill magazine, which further caught the public's imagination and added to the mythology of the Mary Celeste.

Valerie is clear that the mystery is not solved in the book, although various theories have been put forward. These range from sea monsters to water spouts and piracy, but none of these are satisfactory.

The book reinforces that idea that man courts disaster when it pits itself against the enormous power of nature. Whatever the detail of the events, it is clear that the ocean was the final victor in the story of the crew of the Mary Celeste.

Valerie Martin explained:- "Conflict deepens between the characters and nature. The extremity of nature is a strategy to force the characters to reveal what is inside them. My own experience of nature is pure terror. Others think it is a wonderful thing to challenge themselves by going to terrible places. I really just want the easy chair."

She continued: "In the nineteenth century people went to sea not for adventure but because they needed the money, this was why they braved the danger. The sea was an incredibly dangerous place. Captain Benjamin Briggs of the Mary Celeste

was one of six children. Five out of those six children were lost at sea, from accidents, drowning or disease.”

Journalist Lee Randall who hosted the talk asked both authors about their literary device of using multiple narrators to tell their respective stories. Rebecca Hunt explained that she felt that by using more than one narrator, she could provide different perspectives and give a fuller, more rounded version of events. “When one story is told through many eyes, it becomes none of their individual stories, it’s something in the middle.”

Valerie Martin agreed with this: “Historical fiction is particularly suited to this method of having different points of view, because by definition it’s not true. Fiction writers are committed to telling lies, and all fiction is a version of events. In history as well as historical fiction it’s hard to put your finger on what really happened. History weighs heavy on us. When we are confronted with unpleasant facts, such as political corruption, these facts can be disturbing, so stories can be rehashed and refocused. As time passes stories get rewritten, and all history is to some extent historical fiction.”

Lee Randall remarked that both books have a sense that the past is always with the reader, and asked for the authors’ views on ghosts.

Rebecca Hunt replied: “Well, I don’t know about ghosts, but in the Antarctic there is a sense of the men of past expeditions still being there. Scott’s hut with his clothes and possessions is still there, perfectly preserved, and his body is still there in the ice somewhere. You do get the sense that history is not dead in Antarctica, it is still present. I find the story of Scott’s failure and demise heart-breaking. Different accounts do paint a very different picture of Scott, and this is what started me thinking about the multiple narrators. Different accounts give a different sense of him.

Even Scott's own diary will show an exaggerated side of him as he was under such tension and pressure."

Valerie Martin took up the thread and explained her own view of ghosts: "I don't believe in ghosts but I believe that many people do. There's a long tradition of ghost stories throughout the world. I don't know why we like to scare ourselves, but we do, ghost stories are cool! Most people don't admit to believing in ghosts, but at the same time everyone has a ghost story, something extraordinary or inexplicable."

An audience member, possibly disappointed that the book does not provide a definitive answer, asked Valerie what she felt the most plausible explanation for the mystery of the Mary Celeste is. "Alien Abduction" she jokes. The audience's laughter shows they aren't buying this, so she continues in a more sensible, but no more enlightening vein. "I tried to get information from older sea captains about what would be the most likely cause, but I found them unwilling to speculate. However, from the accounts it was obvious to me that the crew left in a hurry. They didn't take supplies, they didn't lower the sails, and they didn't lash the wheel. The Captain of the Mary Celeste was an experienced, well respected Captain who would not have left the ship that way. This makes me speculate that the Captain was not on board when the others left. But it's unlikely we'll ever know.

The Edinburgh International Book Festival runs until the 25th August at Charlotte Square Gardens