

## Summary and Comments of Pawel Huelle's *Cold Sea Stories*

The 59-year-old author was born in Gdansk, Poland. He began studies in philology at Gdansk University, before becoming a journalist, working for the press office of the Solidarity Movement in the late 1980s. He is a renowned writer of novels, short stories and essays.

Fortunately, there is an interview with Huelle at the back of the book which provides insights into his writing. He wrote *Cold Sea Stories* when he was about 50 years old after realising that he is "a man of the Baltic"; hence the Baltic Sea being the setting for all the stories. He says this is a culture of "herrings, potatoes and vodka", but also one of sadness, melancholy, nostalgia and bleakness. It is an environment that fascinates me, because I have never lived anywhere like it and wonder why people remain in such environments. Equally, Huelle has characters searching for the light and "ultimately disappear into it". Added to that are themes of the cycles of time with the fluidity of time mirrored by the fluidity of memory, and of life's beginnings and ends, personal identity and ghosts. Huelle adds that the stories are a synthesis of his life, and you can tell quite easily that the stories are mostly autobiographical, taken either from his own experiences, his studies, his research, or from stories told to him. Only one story does not contain a large and important book.

1. I would like to start with The Bicycle Express, because it is so autobiographical, and provides a clear background to Huelle's attitudes and political standpoint. The setting is the general strike and revolution of 1980 when Huelle was about 20 years old. Huelle and his friend would cycle to the shipyard gates in Gdansk to collect anti-communist Solidarity leaflets and then distribute them. The leaflets represent the distinction between the written word and people's knowledge of events. The rebellion was repressed, but we know the rest. This experience instigated Huelle's change of career to journalism.

The greatest charm of this story is the inclusion of Lucjan. This a true story of Huelle's father's cousin who was arrested by the Soviets in 1939 and sent to a Gulag. Everyone thought he had died in Katyn (where tens of thousands of Polish officers and intelligentsia were massacred by the Soviets). In the Gulag, he became an alcoholic which sent him blind. He was a genius who "knew 18 languages perfectly" and read books in Braille after losing his sight. Lucjan was pleased that life continued in his absence, on seeing Huelle as a baby, and on hearing Huelle's political interests said that he was more interested in hearing about Huelle's dreams for the future. Perhaps Lucjan's obsession with language is a means for him to continue to exist.

Beautiful quote at the end:

"On they went, those dim travellers under the lonely night, through gloom..." (Virgil).

2. Franz Carl Weber is about PH's childhood and the actual train set that his father had brought back from Switzerland for his w sons. This is a

cherished toy in austere, communist Poland. Their flights of fantasy are lived out with maps of far-off places which they would pretend to travel through. PH did in fact return to the Swiss shop, Franz Carl Weber, but it had no railways sets. He does not say whether his father had in fact committed suicide, or whether he had been arrested by the communists. PH depicts the harsh treatment and scorn the janitor had for his father, an engineer. Huelle does not comment on whether this was true for his father in real life or whether he committed suicide. This part of the story may represent a generic experience of Communist Poland. This part of the story, particularly the love his father has for his sons, had me in tears.

There is a seamless shift between the past and the present in this story through the narrator's memory.

3. Abulafia is about madness and obsession with language. This story echoes his former interest in philology. A prisoner in the desert: to avoid going mad in his sandy confines, he tries to conjure up his memories. But these disappeared, causing anguish. He then composes elegies in his L1, before translating them into ancient Greek and Latin, and then memorising them. (What a great mind exercise.) He is horrified when he forgets them.

He then writes a concise book of his life, using letters to represent each word in the sentence. He can scratch these in the sand.

The prisoner was the son of a wealthy landowner (who slapped his wife for using the Polak language with her servants). When the prisoner was a cadet, he was sneered at for writing poetry. He falls in love with Hanka, a German. Polaks tried to burn down their manor, his parents die. His mother's language died with her.

Madness → Abulafia, Jewish sage who discussed primordial, universal language with Dante. The prisoner read about this and studies everything written on philology (Huelle's area of study too). He comes across the language of the Berbers – mysterious Saharan No people. Three standing stones with inscriptions are said to contain the universal pattern for all alphabets and languages.

He sold his estate, went to the desert: robbed, beaten, imprisoned. He ponders his own weakness = stupidity? He is set free, sees "3 hags at the end", at a spinning wheel, the tribe moves away in the night, he dies alone, perfectly happy. The old Kashubian woman also dies, suggesting that if language is not passed down to younger generations, then the past tied to it is forgotten. Thus, her existence is forgotten.

Pomeranian Junkers' chronicle of Joachim Kotwitz, 1899, said to be murdered in the Sahara. Huelle finds an essay on "Dante and Abulafia", 1869, and written about by Umberto Eco.

In the interview at the back, Huelle says that "Abulafia" is "about how a person goes to the very edge of existence, in search of something that is ill-defined:

the utopian dream of the language of the Garden of Eden, spoken by all mankind before the Tower of Babel”.

I love this story, because I share the love of language, though not to the point of obsessiveness. It's interesting how the prisoner might already be mad before he gets imprisoned, but then loses his mind when his memory goes.

4. Depka and Rzepka is a surreal story of an orange ball on the water that collided with fishing boats, burning the entire crew and the boat. This turns out to be the cruel reality of the Hel peninsula inhabitants who would light fires to mislead boats to the shore, and then plunder the wreckages and kill all the survivors as they were witnesses. Duke Swietopelk punished Depka, the pirate chief, by having him tarred, tied to the ship's mast and burned the ship. This happened between 1243-54. This became legend: anyone who met this burning ship was doomed to die.

Politically: PH writes of his family's forced emigration by Stalin and the “Big Three” to Gdansk; therefore, the family's diet of fish. PH's actual experience of obtaining fish for the Christmas Eve meal is narrated: sent to the fishermen “like a secret agent”. The simple narration belies the harsh strategies of people to get food/goods; juxtaposition of 13<sup>th</sup> century piracy to Communist times of struggle is pertinent. Bishop Sedenza was a real person whose capture was recorded in medieval chronicles.

PH was 5 when his father, a ship's mechanic, told him this story, a tradition in Kashubian folklore. PH is fascinated by Kashubia. This is NW of Gdansk and populated by self-sufficient ethnic people who made their own bread, butter and sausages. In fact, they made everything except salt, oil for lamps and nails. There was no electricity, so no TV or radio. They told incredible stories for hours in the evenings, drinking beer.

5. The Fifteen Glasses of Gendarme Polanke, also based on PH's childhood visit to Kashubia, has a much earlier time frame of 1909 or 1910, so the atmosphere is different. It is also the only story without a large and important book in it.

The Gendarme comes across a woman at a “roadside crucifix” (another religious allusion); he is terrified of the look in her eye and takes her to be an evil spirit. Interesting juxtaposition of Gendarme Polanke drinking shots while Hersz, a travelling salesman, travels with a horse and trap and finds the woman drenched, cold and feverish. The Gendarme collapses in an “abyss of drink”. Meanwhile, the woman is seen to by a servant and old Mrs Zabrodka, who “had never seen such a beautiful girl before”.

Polanke = universal policeman representing all regimes in PH's part of the world before Polish independence, before 1918.

PH intends to write a novel about the woman and her secret.

6. Dr Cheng is a story of death and bright light. A man returns from the U.S. to his homeland of his first 20 years at the time of 9/11. There are repeats of the second plane crash on all TVs. His wife, Sophie, died of a heart attack on the pavement, but did he die instead as she had wished??? They wanted to buy “I Ching” – “The Book of Changes”.

Dr Cheng has “a wide selection of dreams to offer” in a Chinese house, opposite former German barracks. None of the narrator’s new experiences has any real meaning for him, because he can’t tell Sophie about them [sad]. He visits his parents in a dream and dies “in a crack of blinding light”.

PH says the Chinese house in Gdansk is real and that the “I Ching” fortune-telling book is said to be a bad influence on Chinese culture due to its fatalistic prophecies. In the story, the narrator recalls a childhood Christmas present, a book that is actually the Polish classic “Mr Inkblot’s Academy” which contains the magical character, a Chinese Dr Pai Chi Wo.

7. Ukiel is also about death and the afterlife. Lake Ukiel is about 130 km SE from Gdansk, and the name means “crooked”. It begins in a contemporary setting of Joachim returning from work [in the US?], passing the stock exchange. He thinks of writing stories of the people he sees along the way in the street, subway and bar. He sees an old woman beggar with mismatched shoes. He recalls his wife, Julia, before she died. He comments that religions “tell bare-faced lies” and are consolations for the naïve. He recalls his father who points to the “Cold Sea” [hence the title of the book] where the Prussians lived. [The first 2 sections are not so interesting, but the story improves at this point.]

Joachim decides to visit his sister, Marta. Very cold environment mirrors her cold treatment like a servant by her son-in-law. He only speaks to her when he needs something. Joachim had always sent money from the US. Marta and family had high hopes for his music, but he had hard times too, and nothing came of it.

Joachim goes ice skating; a figure copies his every move; he dies and Julia approaches: “all laws of physics are broken. The crooked lines of time run together. It’s like a sort of loop”. [Hence the name, Ukiel = crooked.]

This story is PH’s consolation for loss through death, grief and afterlife. Once again, memory is the only means of continuing one’s existence. After reading the narrator’s comment on religion, I find it ironic that people in Huelle’s stories enter the afterlife through a bright light as a form of consolation.

8. Óland: a fairy tale? legend?

A shepherd, Bjorn, alone at the cliffs after his sheep had jumped off; Master punishes him: instead of death, he must work 1 year for each ewe he lost and 2 for each ram of the whole flock. He lives alone, reads the Bible. A ship arrives; men bury an empty chest and a man stays behind; strange vision of the man’s face at night in the light. The man took on a youthful form by day,

but had an ancient face at night. (Was this Rapunzel?) In ice and snow, Bjorn and his dog leave the island; they are found dead. [sad: his vision of his father]

PH stayed at Öland island off the Swedish coast for 3 weeks. It has a “mythical landscape” without people. The story is connected to an “apocryphal [doubtful authenticity] legend’ about the Three Kings: after Bethlehem, 2 went home while the third wandered for centuries, unable to find his way back.

9. The Flight into Egypt is about Chechen refugees’ arrival in Poland, which was inspired by a newspaper photo of a young woman, like a Virgin Mary icon: her suffering mingled with pride. The narrator does a painting of her in the desert; he unexpectedly comes across her. he is grateful to her for his recovery [not stated] and he hadn’t painted for 15 years. Narrator makes a sign for Aslan, Almira’s husband who is a carpenter and his sign had spelling mistakes. They tell of their trip to Poland. Aslan becomes angry at seeing the painting, thinking Almira had met narrator while he was still in Chechnya. He is appeased on learning of the newspaper clipping with her photo.

One month later, a Molotov cocktail is thrown on their roof, and the house burns to the ground. The family leaves for a safe house in the north.

10. Mimesis [means imitation – the reason may become clearer after reading the final story, “First Summer”]

This has the apocalyptic setting of an abandoned village where 2 people live when a stranger appears. Jakub is scared he will die from eating raw chicken. Harmensoon, the preacher of a very strict sect. Jakub finds out they were Mennonites, a Friesland Protestant sect. they don’t even wear buttons [a bit like the Amish in “Witness”, PH says]. The girl’s sister, Hanna, left to be with Ludwig, which shames the family. Later, the Germans deported everyone.

Jakub builds a boat with Willman, the only other person left. Willman is angry when Jakub moves in with the girl. Willman takes off alone with the boat they built. She and Jakub go to Hanna in Poland; can’t prove she isn’t German.

VI takes a turn to the future: Mr Helke [Huelle], writer from Europe, but he says that’s not his name to Mr Hook, the carer for the girl who is now an old woman. She is in a wheelchair and tells the writer her story. Jakub had left her for an obese piano tuner, then takes up with Hanna. She never told Hanna that she’d slept with Ludwig.

PH: The Mennonites were a religious minority who were forced to escape the Netherlands in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, persecuted by the Spanish Catholics. The Polish king was tolerant and gave them land on the Vistula delta. Those who went to Russia had their land expropriated by the Communists, so also came to Poland. They were good at reclaiming land for polders. The Mennonite culture was destroyed by both the Nazis in WWII and the Communists. They were pacifists, joined no armies, but some became medics. PH thinks people can’t live outside mainstream society. They are People of the Book, like

Orthodox Jews or Muslims. Their abandoned houses and villages still exist, filled with ghosts.

11. First Summer is the final story in the book and returns to the first story like a book end. The narrator, middle-aged, seems to be having an affair. Hilarious setting of a gay wedding, "Gay European Union for Poland", at a boarding house. Sabina was not there; her daughter dies in the US; we learn they never really got together.

After their graduation, they went on a cycling and camping trip, but she always said "not yet" to sex. In an abandoned house, there is a Mennonite cemetery; she is amazed; he tells her of their religious persecution in the Netherlands. He falls into a small cellar and finds a Bible owned by Harmensoon. She says he should write a story. PH does: "Mimesis". He throws the Bible into the sea.

PH says that the book "can never be as important to today's modern civilisation as it was in the past". It no longer has the same significance, as shown by the gay wedding with naked men on the beach and the tourists' eyes averted.

Typical themes abound of light, cold, the sea, memories, abandonment, and ghosts. The father-figure is prominent in many stories, though women feature as well. I'm guessing PH grieves the loss of his father, while acknowledging his positive influences.

It is nice to have stories of differing lengths; however, the stories were of uneven strength. I liked how the narrator threw the Bible into the sea. Does this mean you don't need the written word to give meaning to existence? Or you don't need the Bible's works to give meaning to existence? Huelle certainly had the need to record his personal stories and those of his father to record and validate their existence.