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The Tower of Parable
A Review of *The Writer's Block* (2019)

Reviewed by Timothy J. Jarvis

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THE TOWER OF PARABLE

Review by Timothy J. Jarvis

Wheatley, Michael. *The Writers' Block*. Black Pear Press, 2019. Chapbook.

It came through the door sometime around noon on a grey summer's day – drizzle falling from a rack of cloud scudding by overhead, gusts howling in the branches of the stunted wych elm outside my window. The hinge of the letterbox flap creaked, and the package fell to the floor, landed with a whump. At the time I was poring over the essays in a volume of criticism on Arthur Machen I was editing. Eager for some respite from staring at text on a screen, I shut the lid of my laptop, got up, and went out into the hallway to see what had been delivered.

The manila padded envelope was addressed to me in a neat cursive. There was no return address, the postmark had been smeared and could not be made out. I tore the package open. I expected a book, and that is what I found, but it was not a book I'd ordered. There was nothing else, no invoice or note of explanation. It was a slim chapbook, *The Writers' Block* by a Michael Wheatley, title and author's name in white block caps on a black ground, the illustration pages of text hacked and seen as if through a tower-shaped hole incised in the cover.

I took the mysterious chapbook into my living room and settled down to read. Within I found six short tales – richly allusive metatexts, lively and experimental, fictional meditations on artistic creation, literature, and writing.

"The Straw Man" tells of a village amid woodland that, every year after harvest time, hosts a fortnight of unfettered artistic creation, at the end of which one of the pieces, the best of them, the Great Work, is burnt as an offering. The Straw Man is making an effigy of straw, his contribution to the tradition of the Great Work, working on the roof of a tower block that looms over the village, but he struggles to create something to satisfy his aesthetic sense. He attempts to revitalise his creativity with materials taken from the abandoned workings of other artists, but it is a disaster, raising a reeky pall when thrown into a furnace. The Straw Man then realises he must make a greater sacrifice... Fantastical Folk Horror is here fused with allegory, producing an extremely unnerving tale of the throes of artistic creation.

The second story, "Simulacrum," tells of a novel of that name first published during the second decade of the nineteenth century, and which concerns the relationship between the wealthy Camille and lower class Timothée in Paris – a scandalous and ambiguous work that seems to prefigure writing by Baudelaire and Zola. Wallace is a one-man critical industry dedicated to uncovering the secrets of this novel and reconstructing its unknown author from clues in the text. After giving a paper at a symposium, he has an uncanny encounter.

"A Burial at Sea" tells of a woman drowning in an ocean of books – a frozen sea that recalls Kafka's famous quote about the best books being axes for the frozen seas within us. But, in a skewering of a particular experimental corpus that includes Kafka (whose vampiric leaching off his female correspondents Deleuze and Guattari have written so brilliantly about), this is an oppressively male ocean of books, and the story is a thoughtful reflection on how stifling canons can be for those excluded from them.

The book concludes with two pieces that explore the commodification of writing and the development of writers. The very brief flash fiction "Catharsis" points to a model of a creative writing workshop that is genuinely collaborative. While in "The Writers' Block," we get successive iterations, drafts, of an allegory of literary creation, or uncreation, or stalled creation, stagnation, erasure – and finally a kind of liberation. It's a story of writing trammelled, of the commodification of art, of how the literary marketplace saps creativity. And of the new stories that might lie outside of the confines of the Block.

Having finished reading, I put the book aside. The approach, a fusion of experimental literature and dark fiction had engaged me. A debut full of rich ideas, *Weird Fiction* laced with metatext and innovation. So I opened my laptop again, typed "Michael Wheatley" into the search bar of my internet browser. I found a website, details of some other publications. There was even a picture of the writer. And there were endorsements on the back of the pamphlet from authors whose work I'd read and admired. It all *seemed* authentic. Yet I couldn't shake the feeling that something was off. And why had the book come to me in the first place?

I turned back to *The Writers' Block* and idly flipped through the pages. My eyes alighted on this line from Attlick, the supposed author of the novel, *Simulacrum*, in the story of that name: "The book hardly belongs to me." That Barthesian notion of the text as a patchwork of quotations flashed into my mind – though *The Writers' Block* is highly original, it is also densely allusive. And I thought of how an author, a person, could also be a composite of various 'quotations.' And, of course, of 'simulacrum,' Baudrillard's concept of a copy without a model.

Pondering this stuff, I felt a chill as if someone had swiped the back of my neck with ice. I don't know how I hadn't seen it before. Michael Wheatley wasn't real, website, photograph, and endorsements notwithstanding. *Wheatley* was a straw man, the Straw Man of the lead story. *Wheatley* was too convenient a name, with its allusions to Dennis, the famous author of occult thrillers, and Ben, the contemporary film maker, director of contemporary Folk Horror masterpieces, *Kill List* and *A Field in England*. And where did that Michael come from? I realised there was another allusion buried in "Simulacrum," a reference to an essay, "Simulacrum," by art historian, Michael Camille. It all fitted together.

At one point in the story "Simulacrum," the unknown writer of *Simulacrum* is compared by Wallace to the equally unknown author of the Ripper murders. This gave me a very uneasy feeling...

I've taped up the letterbox. I've not left the house for days, surviving on dry cereal and instant coffee. I've been poring over the chapbook, looking for either reassurance or some definitive horror – I've found neither, but am entangled, more and more, in its web.

BIONOTE

Timothy J. Jarvis is a writer, scholar, and teacher of Creative Writing with an interest in the antic, the weird, the strange. His first novel, *The Wanderer*, was published by Perfect Edge Books in the summer of 2014. His short-fiction has appeared in various venues. He is also interested in drone and ambient music and has collaborated with sound artists on sleeve notes and performance. He currently lives in Bedford, a small town in the hallowed/cursed M1 corridor.