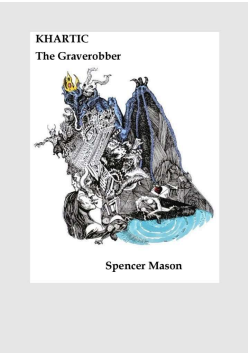
‘Khartic the Graverobber’, by Spencer Mason

Review by Natalie Jayne Clark



Spencer Mason is an unruly and canny time traveller, barrelling figures of history, fiction, and mythology into their time machine, then booting these people out into our cold concrete and metal twenty-first century, with a final affectionate push to encourage them to wander it lawlessly. In so doing, Mason provokes us to disregard the many small ways life has changed over the centuries, and to focus instead on all that remains evergreen: war, poverty, suffering, death, but also hope and human connection, however small their glimmers may be.

The first figure featured in Mason’s collection is Antigone, a character of Greek mythology, who defies the king and law in order to give her brother a burial and not leave his body abandoned. In the poet’s reimagining, she traverses Pokrovsk in Ukraine, a city that is right now under intense attack from Russia. Here we find Antigone, attempting again to give dignity to the dead by collecting, marking, and burying bodies – whole or in parts – where she can. Her sister Ismene, in both the original tale and in Mason’s modern depiction, represents the cautious and law-abiding, those who keep a safe distance and have given up trying to tangibly help – a clear call to us to not look away from the ‘land calling for a mother’, where ‘Creon toys with / drones for eyes of the state’.

Another character utilised to highlight the parallels between now and then in *Khartic The Graverobber* is the protagonist of Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, the poverty-stricken ex-law student of Raskolnikov. In Mason’s version, Raskolnikov’s despair is turned inwards, and his contemplation of suicide

correlates with our current job insecurities and lack of purpose: ‘he let the houseplants die first / to better train his wrists for severances’.

Sappho, the tenth muse, is turfed out of the time machine during the French Revolution, but its kinship to our own age is clear: the wealth gap is as vast a gulf as it was then. She also ‘wonders why this talk of freedom / is always bolstered by / the hating of a woman’. ‘The Tenth Muse Storms the Bastille’ follows Sappho as she tries to be the bard and create poetry and music whilst she passes through the chaotic scene. Through her, Mason manages to alight on several perpetually pertinent questions of freedom, class and gender imbalances, and individualism versus collectivism in a short but richly dense poem.

Elsewhere in the collection we meet Julius Caesar and Robert the Bruce, who take in the rivers and caves now cluttered with modern-day detritus – used condoms, empty cans, and pesticides that have killed the spiders which, legend has it, once taught the latter to persevere. The Marquis de Lafayette, who Mason treats to a performance of *Hamilton*, transitions from utter elation at his depiction in the first act, to ‘Utter Outrage’ in the second. ‘The Husk of Hollis Brown Finds Himself on Tinder’ is written in short phrases weaved across the page, echoing the staccato swiping motion of using the app. The poem can be read as three columns or across each line, giving readers the freedom to choose how they engage with Brown’s predicament. In Bob Dylan’s ‘Ballad of Hollis Brown’, Brown murders his children, wife, and then himself to cease the suffering of their poverty, but here his ‘husk’ seeks solace by searching for a date. These examples in particular challenge the imagination: who would I put in which modern situation, and how drastically would they – and their journeys – change as a result?

Mason has moments with modern folk strewn throughout their collection, too, such as in ‘Dinner With Biff’, where we are treated to the delightful aphorism, ‘you can suffer for your art / but you can smile for it too’. The thematic links between past and present figures often revolve around desperation and despondency in response to their current circumstances. Poems such as ‘Fractured Falling’, ‘It was the beginning of spring’, and ‘I was searching for a reason’ confront suicide and self-harm, mostly from the perspective of hindsight, yet each contain small elements which ‘infest you with hope’, offering glimpses of resilience amid despair.

Mason deftly incites in us a reappraisal of our everyday by thrusting appositely selected characters into scenarios that we have become inured and accustomed to – whether that's events happening elsewhere, as seen on the news or online, or situations unfolding right here in Scotland. We discern that Mason is trying to make sense of the world, particularly of its painful and dark parts, using these people as a stand-in, a step removed and existing in the imagination, so as to lessen the sting of suffering as we delve headfirst into these larger questions of the human condition alongside them.

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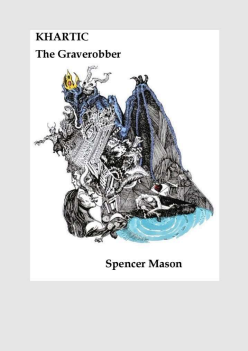

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