

THE TERRORS—Tom Chivers

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Reviews from Rob A Mackenzie, William Bedford & Sue Butler

Rob A Mackenzie: The Terrors is "a sequence of imagined emails sent from the author to inmates at London's Newgate Prison incarcerated between roughly 1700 and 1760." The emails take the form of prose poems and appear to belong fully both to the present and to the 18th century. Burgers and faggots co-habit on the grill. A prison inmate, William Dodd, is urged to "apply to be a hermit; spook the shopping malls in hair-shirt, shell-suit, Nikes." Textspeak and archaic diction mingle. The emails transcend not only distance but time. Past and present horrors are separated by a click; to Elizabeth Brownrigg, the author writes, "I attach evidence of your crimes in high res jpeg's."

Because these are emails, the reader often has to guess at the full stories behind them. Tom Chivers offers often discomforting details, and leaves space for the reader's imagination to fill the gaps. There were moments when I found the technique more frustrating than intriguing, but generally the tension between the known and unknown engaged me. A black humour runs through the correspondence and this, at the end of the email to James Hall (who clearly died a terrible death), is surely Chivers sending himself up: "Your obit lacks the moralising tone I'm used to, James. A cop-out or just critical ennui? I'd like to fill in gaps, just here and there."

The humour affects the tone, which is dispassionate, with little emotional involvement. He writes to Jack Shepherd, "I must split: the new run of Prison Break's on and anyway, I'm sure that this will bounce." The pamphlet presents stark fragments of life without direct emotional intrusion, but the reader only has to ask why an email might bounce to find a suggestion of death. Emotional content is fuelled by implication rather than appeal. The dizzying array of images and fragments in some of these poems can occasionally feel like a self-conscious effect, but it's this technique that also makes The Terrors so intriguing. The worlds of past and present become hard to distinguish when the emailer looks onto an knoll and appears to see the recipient Robert Fuller's "orange jump-suit" and hears the equally anachronistic "drone of Boeings slowly stacking in the air above." His gaze finally settles on Fuller carrying a gun and climbing a stile, "denying the having done; the doing of it; the act; the thing itself." Terror and horror (and denials that it has taken place) are as alive in the 21st century as in the 18th, in ever more sophisticated forms. As Chivers asks in the email to Babs_Spencer, "What fires will quench the thirst of the hangman?"

William Bedford: In The Terrors, Tom Chivers has created a virtual world where the poet sends imagined emails "to inmates at London's Newgate Prison incarcerated between roughly 1700 and 1760". The emails are prose poems that get their title— "Death is cloathed in terrors"—and stories from The Newgate Calendar: Newgate, that grimmest of London's notorious prisons, the stage post to Tyburn and butcheries most criminals would have to work hard to replicate. Rather cleverly, Chivers takes one of his epigraphs from The Guardian to make the point that the then of the Calendar is the now of our own celebrity culture.

Being prose poems, these messages from the lower depths depend upon content for their most powerful effects, rhythm and imagery for their rhetorical power. Chivers can use metaphors ("Watch a shank of lamb slip off the bone as a woman stepping from her dress") but it is the detail which gives this volume its parabolic force.

"I hear you're going feral in that terra incognito", Chivers says addressing William Dodds, punning cleverly on his title, and suggesting "You should apply to be a hermit; spook the shopping malls in hair-shirt, shell-suit, Nikes". Eighteenth-century "messages from God" are deconstructed by contemporary slang ("It's a doddle") and anachronistic language ("wistful maidens") is challenged by urban squalor—"The burger vans hum as I wait for the nightbus, onions caramelising on the grills, faggots and all." In this hyperreality, eighteenth century criminals jostle with American TV series ("By day you may be a Desperate Housewife, but you proved you're dynamite by night in a Mantua-frock, apron, gown and hat in Moorfields), the glamorous parade undaunted by Emma Robertson's drawing of a hangman's rope on the opposite page.

In some ways, Chivers is doing what Eliot did in the 1920s: bringing urban squalor and terror into poetry. We are used to that in fiction, but he seems to me to be doing something new in poetry. And the fact that these are prose poems does not lessen the impact. Poetry is language, not discourse, but the short passages of The Terrors use language in a way which can only be described as poetry:

Hooded in a whimple. Skirts up to here. It was you, wasn't it? Gun Street, Spitalfields. Drab or Tom. Findy sides open to the fog. Bundle of kid.

You would be hard put to argue why this wasn't poetry. Some of the detail is horrible—the torture scenes of "Murder by inches" for instance—but the ethical point is obvious. "How many killings make a spree?" Chivers asks, a question as relevant to contemporary London as to the world of Jack Ketch and William Dodd.

Defoe and Blake stand behind Ackroyd and Sinclair in the frightening underworld Chivers has created. It is a remarkable début, an ambitious, chilling achievement, brilliantly and disturbingly illustrated by Emma Robertson. It offers glimpses of a London gone viral as much of hyperreality has gone viral, a London whose feral streets spread like a plague, infecting the rest of the culture. This is exciting stuff, promising great work in the future.

Sue Butler: Sent: Saturday morning, July 2009 To: Tom Chivers Subject: Good Old Blake

Dear Tom,

When I saw the email format of your pamphlet I balked. But flicking through, scanning for a way in, I was delighted to see

an old friend, Blake, “throat rammed with visionary slogans, winged demons at his shoulder, breaching barricades, fires at night” and then I knew it was going to be a good read. But I did find it rather unsettling, gory even. For example, in the poem where you attach the evidence of crimes in a high res jpeg (which I didn’t even try to open) your first bullet point explains in graphic detail: “1. The subject is tied up naked, beaten with a hearth broom, a horsewhip, or a cane, till she is speechless.” And in the email to Elizabeth Chivers (any relation?) you mention “the concrete pond, that drained yields flick-knives, shanks, combs, the common carver” and ask “How many killings make a spree?/ How many murders give a place a name?” I found some of these poems bleak with a capital B. Oh no, I’m using a computer at the library and my time’s expired. (I don’t have email at home.) More tomorrow. Yours sincerely (though I suspect on email that’s not right) Sue.

Sent: Monday lunchtime, July 2009To: Tom ChiversSubject: Grim Gallows Humour

Dear Tom,

Though dark and full of crime, I also found your poems had a grim, gallows humour, well used to create some striking, visual images like in ‘Style-Stalker’ where “You added some glam, sporting half sack and petticoats as the mob gathered round.”

Another line that stood out for me came in the email to Jack Shepherd:

Immortality’s a pamphlet away.This makes me—the competition.

And I agree that if you looked Jack Shepherd up now, you’d find him: “flogging faulty flatscreens off Tottenham Court Road, or down in Spitalfields, hustling the hipsters in a deep Scottish brogue, feet bound in newsprint.”

I liked this switching between past and present.

Tom, I’m on my lunch break and need to get back to work, so please forward the text below to Emma. Thanks.

Dear Emma, I really liked your drawings in Tom’s pamphlet—the meat on hooks, the hangman’s noose, the chubby cherub or fledgling angel asleep on the gravestone. Their stark simplicity works like the music in a horror film; it compounds the terror.

Sent: Thursday lunchtime, July 2009To: Helena NelsonSubject: Cracking Read

Dear Nell,

Tom’s pamphlet was a cracking read. At the end he lists some sources and I’m sure knowing those texts would’ve helped my understanding immensely, but I found a way through anyway.

And in case I’ve not conveyed the full horror, I’ll leave you with an extract from Tom’s email to James Hall: “You pitch his blood into the coal-hole. His still-warm corpse decays inside the privy. The yard begins to smell like coffee burnt into a brick of ash.”

Don’t laugh, but it’s made me feel rather jittery walking down narrow alleys and cycling home in the dark.

Love, Sue