

Shelfish Thoughts



Regi Claire

I WAS BORN AND BRED IN SWITZERLAND. MY first holiday abroad, at the age of fourteen, was spent in Cornwall. I still remember setting off for the small village shop with my younger sister, some money and a list of phrases I anxiously rehearsed en route – “good morning”, “a pint of milk”, “a loaf of bread”, “thank you” – and smiling like the cat that got the cream when the shop assistant actually handed us the right items!

While still in primary, I couldn't imagine anything more glamorous than becoming the first female Formula-One champion racing driver, clad in leather from head to toe and taking off my helmet to be kissed by some Prince Charming at the finish. Such fantasies were no doubt fuelled by my avid consumption of those magical stories where nothing ever seems impossible.

I'd loved the world of books from earliest childhood: our house was full of them and, as we didn't have a TV, my parents would read to us every day when we were small. Some of the books were so special – with illustrations by well-known Swiss artists – that we were only allowed to handle them in the presence of adults. My paternal grandfather had been a book-binder, after all. Perhaps this explains why I still find it heart-breaking to see books mistreated, though I admit I did sacrifice several unreadably battered tenth-hand paperbacks to prop up a chest of drawers in one of our tilting rooms.

After my racing car phase, books were all I needed to escape. Astrid Lindgren was a favourite, also various German authors of adventure, detective and romantic Wild West stories. Once I turned into a teenager, my taste gradually narrowed down to serious fiction (Andersch, Böll, Büchner, Frisch, Hesse, Kleist). Later, at university, it was the course requirements in German and English literature that mainly dictated my choice. Invariably the books I bought were new. The culture of secondhand bookshops has yet to come into fashion in Switzerland – when my parents moved house recently they were forced to chuck out a number of perfectly good books, and even had to pay for their disposal.

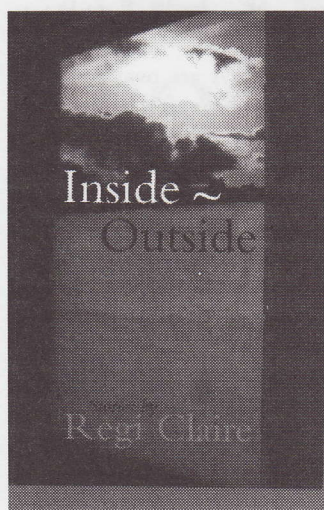
How reassuring, therefore, to come to Scotland and discover the pleasure of browsing and buying 'old' books. Among others, I have acquired a lovely hardback of Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark*, dustjacketed as evocatively as the writing within. Also, after much foraging, a copy of *Creating a Scene* by Elspeth Davie (it's time her work was brought back into print!). Another prize is a handsome first English edition of Carson McCullers' *Clock Without*



Hands, with page after page of sensuously creamy rippled paper and still bearing the sticker of the Cape Town bookshop where it was first purchased. In fact, my shelves contain quite a few firsts by now. Several Graham Greenes and Rosamond Lehmanns, though pride of place belongs to *Dombey and Son* – which, incidentally, Dickens began in Switzerland. Apart from some faint foxing to the plates it's in excellent condition, bound in half calf, with raised spine bands, gilt lettering and decoration (it even has the small pinholes that show the pages are the original serial sheets). Last but not least, the secondhand bookshops around my home in Edinburgh's Southside have yielded a rich crop of detective fiction, including some deliciously lurid looking Ross MacDonald paperbacks.

So much for reading; my own writing has been another matter altogether. Apart from a lengthy attempt at a Red Indian adventure-cum-love story before my teens and a few angst-ridden prose poems in adolescence, I never really dared try my hand at it. Writing, I believed, was for the chosen few, certainly not for me. At least, not yet. I'd have to wait, I kept telling myself, wait and learn things.

With the encouragement of my Scottish writer husband, Ron Butlin, I finally decided to set aside my latest excuse for delay, a PhD thesis on Graham Swift's novels. Between putting down floor tiles and painting our new flat, I embarked on my first short story, in German – Swiss German, my mother tongue, isn't a written language. Then I decided to have a go in English. I made up a *nom de plume* and allowed myself a year to get a story accepted, but during those twelve months I produced only two pieces. Luckily, just before the year was out and my self-esteem hit rock-bottom, both were taken. A few months later I found myself joint winner of the *Edinburgh Review* Tenth Anniversary Short Story Competition. From then on things seemed to pick up, with the award of a Writer's Bursary from the Scottish Arts Council and the publication of my first collection of stories, *Inside-Outside*. Now I've started on a novel. The race is on between it and the next millennium.



Inside~Outside, a first collection of short stories by Regi Claire, is published in paperback by Scottish Cultural Press at £5.95. ISBN 1 84017023 9