

The Pebble Chance: Feuilletons & Other Prose

BY MARIUS KOCIEJOWSKI
(BIBLIOASIS, 2014, \$22.95)

THE MAIN TITLE of Marius Kociejowski's *Pebble Chance* is drawn from the game of bocce and refers to the presence of both skill and chance in determining the course of a ball. An unseen pebble can redirect a ball away from, or toward, its target. So it is with Kociejowski's life, as described in the diverse essays in his book, where chance encounters with both people and books and manuscripts lead him in unexpected directions.

Kociejowski, described by bookseller and polemicist Bill Hoffer as a "Canadian poet in exile,"¹ is a Canadian by birth who was primarily resident in England while working in the antiquarian book trade and publishing four books of poetry and acclaimed travel books on the Middle East. It is Kociejowski's time in the book trade that informs many of the 17 essays in *The Pebble Chance* and which makes it, in the words of his publisher, a "book lover's book."

The lead essay, "A Factotum in the Book Trade," sets the scene nicely. Never a self-employed bookseller yet more than an assistant, Kociejowski describes the transition from the old-school booksellers ("We had to wear ties") to the "barbarians" gathering at the gates in the form of the independent dealers and book scouts who would ultimately displace the gentlemen booksellers. Lamenting the transition to a period "when booksellers began to have to sell books in order to survive" and the traditional stores began disappearing, Kociejowski made the transition to the new wave of bookshops at the Ulysses bookshop near the British Museum, with its memorable co-owner Peter Jolliffe.

Kociejowski provides a brief yet evocative portrait of Jolliffe, a true eccentric in a field where there was, and continues to be, a lot of competition. Simultaneously "the worst

bookseller who ever lived" and "the greatest bookman of our times," Jolliffe was complex. Kociejowski observes, "One might be tempted to say he always shot himself in the foot, but for the fact he always missed." His eccentricity was evident as were the fine (and expensive) books he amassed. While a number of *Amphora* readers will be aware of bookshops facing threat of closure from fire marshals and city bylaw officers, Kociejowski speculates that Ulysses was the first to be closed down by a health department due to Jolliffe's hoarding of fruit and rotting food and the resulting mice. Having met and purchased books from Jolliffe over a number of years, I can attest to the accuracy of Kociejowski's largely affectionate portrait.

As well as writing about booksellers, Kociejowski provides wonderful sketches of the customers he encountered over the years, notably writers. He describes poet and university librarian Philip Larkin, who was put in the awkward position of having to buy his writings for his institution's collection, responding when quoted a price for one of his rare books: "What, for *that* rubbish!"

Bruce Chatwin lived above Bertram Rota's bookshop on Long Acre and was a frequent customer as a buyer and seller. His physical decline from AIDS and his attendant erratic behaviour in the bookshop and beyond is unsentimentally described. The wonderful Spanish novelist Javier Marías frequented Rota's and, while he and Kociejowski hardly spoke, they were familiar with each other. Kociejowski later came across an early story by Marías featuring the bookshop and "a not particularly flattering sketch of me." They went on to become friends.

Friendships and encounters with fellow poets are also described (including *The Pebble Chance* dedicatee, Canadian poet Norm Sibum, "the second greatest poet in the world" after the author, we learn). Kociejowski describes well-known and less well-known poets with affection, admiration and memorable anecdotes. For example, consider this description of a W.S. Graham reading where the poet was introduced by Kociejowski:

Shortly after Graham started reading, there was a rustle of paper in one corner of the room.

A dark voice came from the corner diagonally opposite, “Who crinkled that piece of paper?” Harold Pinter ran his eye over the cornered section of the audience. “Come on, who was it?” he barked. “It was you, you bitch, wasn’t it! Throw her out of here!” The unfortunate lady’s husband stood up to protest, “How dare you address my wife in that way?” Within seconds there was pandemonium, trouble sprouting all over the place. Graham, meanwhile, flapped his arms like a heron about to take flight, shouting “Whoah, whoah! What’s this, a fucking football game?” It was rather too late for me to intervene.

This excerpt captures Kociejowski’s unique voice, informative, amusing and poetic. I especially like the description of the poet flapping his arms “like a heron about to take flight”—a poetic sensibility, indeed.

The centrepiece in *The Pebble Chance* is the longest essay in the collection, “The Testament of Charlotte B.,” the one essay which, in the author’s words, “required a considerable amount of research.”² The essay previously appeared in several shorter iterations, most notably in Iain Sinclair’s *London: City of Disappearances*,³ suitably, in the “Bibliomania” chapter. On first reading I thought the work was a clever pastiche, but I have now accepted the author’s assertion that despite incredible coincidence and early-19th-century melodrama verging on *grand guignol*, we are in fact dealing with present and past realities. We share the author’s sense that “a story too outlandish to be true must be true.”

While working at Bertram Rota, Kociejowski came across a long undisturbed package of manuscripts, including a handwritten letter and a 28-page manuscript written by “Charlotte B ____.” On reading the letter he recognizes the recipient as his great-great-grandfather, a general in the British Army in India. The narrative accompanying the letter recounts how Charlotte is raped, kidnapped and raped again by “Mr H ____.” Based on details in the narrative, research by Kociejowski reveals “Mr H ____” to be Richard Heaviside, thereby appearing to verify Charlotte’s narrative.

The vicissitudes of modern life intrude when a colleague of Kociejowski is mugged when transporting the manuscript, only to have it reappear largely undamaged from several days in a briefcase in the rain, “because it had been tucked in between a copy of *The Times*, and because it was written in iron-based ink on handmade paper. . . . Quality is a passport to permanence.”

Through checking land office records and a handwriting comparison at the British Library, Kociejowski identifies Charlotte as the author of a series of letters from France written from 1792 through 1795 and published in 1797. As Kociejowski puts it, Charlotte “had escaped Heaviside only to be caught up in the French Revolution.”

“The Testament of Charlotte B.” is a delightful literary detective story evoking past sensibilities while demonstrating what can be achieved through perseverance and intelligent research, and again evoking the collection’s title, chance.

Kociejowski is a fine poet and raconteur, and his bookman’s sensibility is evident throughout *The Pebble Chance*. He evokes much that will engage those who value books and the power of literature. Seemingly throwaway lines resonate, such as “Anyone who haunts second-hand bookshops the way I do will know by the smell alone their ‘dead zones.’” This is a book that should avoid a store’s dead zone in the future. It also deserves readers now.

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1. Quoted in John Metcalf, “In Memoriam—William Hoffer, 1944–1997,” *Canadian Notes & Queries*, no. 52, 1997, 3. Kociejowski first came to my attention when Hoffer published his essay “The Machine Minders” in 1986. Kociejowski published a memorial poem for Hoffer, “Communiqué for William Hoffer,” in his collection *Music’s Bride* (Anvil Press Poetry).
 2. “An Interview with Marius Kociejowski,” distributed by publisher Biblioasis with review copies of *The Pebble Chance*.
 3. Iain Sinclair (ed.), *London: City of Disappearances* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2006).

~ REVIEWED BY PAUL WHITNEY