

Bourne
toWrite...
creative writing
workshops

Whitechapel to Canterbury

by MaryPat Campbell

For me, you know, one of the tragedies of real life is that there is no background music. This is because I lost my background hearing in the bell foundry. My ability to hear the E when the bell was first struck, in the end destroyed the fine tuning in my ears. Or maybe I'm just blaming something good because it ended up with a bad result, who knows.

All I hear now is the commotion of fellow inmates' internal struggles, those loud raucous places civilised folk are able to keep hidden and don't shout aloud. Here, most people spew it up and all around and it's truly deafening.

Ursula, my new friend, or foe, I cannot decide which, doesn't make any noise, except for the scrape of her clogs on the stone floors. I don't know if she can hear or speak. She can draw maps, and they are beautiful, if the one she drew for me of St. Mary Axe is anything to go by. Around the four edges of the page she had drawn mad little sketches of monsters and animals and fantastical buildings, which no one could ever build, like monks in the middle ages drew in the margins of their illuminated manuscripts. Ursula has a wild and quiet beauty, while the scuff of her clogs and her rude drawings speak loudly to me of her busy and rattled mind. All kinds of loud are here and none of it is background.

On an outing once from the foundry to fix the famous bells at Canterbury, I was mesmerised by an ancient book made of vellum exhibited there. It was stored under glass in one of the side chapels, so it would not be damaged by folk who came to gawp

at it, like me. The book was opened at a different page each day under the glass case, to show pictures of stories in the scriptures. I was enchanted by the colours, blue and yellow, scarlet and crimson and gold, and could not take my eyes away from these dazzling pages.

As I studied them, I could make out small sketches in the margins of the illuminated pages, and took them to be images coming from the monks' wandering minds grown tired by the long hours of working by candle light. There was a bearded lion playing a lute, a frog hiding under a yellow flower, a man with his legs tied in knots and a beautiful woman showing her bare breasts to the world. Putting myself in the shoes of the monks, I imagined their sketches were like a holiday from the work of painting that the monks must have toiled over for many months and years, like my holiday that day from Whitechapel to Canterbury.

I long for ordinary background noise that I remember from my foundry days. The hearty banter between the men which made me feel that I was part of a large family, full of noisy playful brothers. Or the clanks and squeaks of handles against tin buckets when their carriers set them down, ringing on the stone floor. Or the hiss of molten metal as it was poured into the huge plaster moulds.

My favourite sound of all, was when the clappers made their first strike on the bell, while I stood nervously by waiting to see if I could do my job of hearing the necessary E. All eyes were upon me then, looking for what must have been an expression on my face of recognition as I heard it and nodded my head three times in acknowledgement of it. The applause then erupted from the people standing all around me, delighted that yet another bell had been cast with flair and success.