

The Stone Tide by Gareth E. Rees

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Who Likes to Be Beside the Seaside?

Have you ever been laughed at by a duck in the middle of the night for pondering the end of civilisation as we know it? Gareth Rees has. Join him as he moves to Hastings and discovers a town on the edge, both literally and figuratively. This 'rebel without a clue' is a writer who, with his fortieth birthday looming, sets up home in a dilapidated Victorian townhouse. With his wife, two daughters and pet cocker spaniel in tow, he soon realises that this is no ordinary residence.

'Whatever that thing was, I didn't want to deal with it. I would not die in my pants.'



A mysterious white orb appears in the garden at night. He hears girls giggling in the bedroom but when he checks on his daughters they're fast asleep. His wife Emily makes the grisly discovery of a mummified heart in the attic. Even the décor is sinister, as beneath the 1970s wallpaper lies a room 'the colour of dried blood.' Absence hangs heavy but apparently there are no ghosts, only subsidence.

Feathered creatures are not Gareth's friends. Upon venturing into his neglected back garden, he endures filthy looks from a malevolent seagull whom he suspects to be the house's eccentric architect reincarnated. Stubbornly reluctant to live and let live, he ends up embroiled in a pointless oven glove-clad battle whilst dodging ancient animal sculptures hidden among the weeds.

On his regular wanderings outside of this madhouse, Gareth notices that Hastings seems to emit a strange magnetic pull, attracting 'magicians, addicts and dreamers.' With a creeping sense of dread, he worries about being swallowed up whole by a sinkhole, suspecting that he may be destined to join the surprising number of other visionaries who ended their days in the area. Apocalyptic weather adds to the vague sense of unfolding doom, although it's hard to tell whether his fears are real or a result of the 'hot dog and candy floss fumes' of the seaside going to his head.

'Sooty, Soo and Sweep were trapped in a glass box, playing synth-pop cover versions for a pound a go to feed their crack habits.'

Gareth is in danger of losing his grip on both his health and home life. He frets about ageing and losing his sense of adventure, reluctant to allow the mundanities of daily life to erode his curiosity. The past catches him unawares at the local beach where among the detritus washed up on shore are his long-buried memories and aspirations.

Hastings emerges as the unlikely star of the story. A former suicide blackspot framed in gothic faded grandeur, this was the place where John Logie Baird drew inspiration for the experiment that would eventually develop into television. There's even a Wetherspoon's named after him. Rees deftly parallels the historical story of the dawn of television with the modern communications age and the current unsettling sense of epoch shifting times. Baird stands accused of unwittingly enslaving people and allowing the huge positive potential of his idea go to waste, with TV instead becoming a modern-day opium of the masses.

'Other people's lives were so compelling when framed in a well-lit window.'

Multiple narratives flip in and out of the past as events are expertly transformed from the ordinary to the surreal. Bizarre stories are told about little-known historical figures of dubious moral character, such as notorious fraudster Charles Dawson. An enthusiastic amateur palaeontologist, he falsified fossils to sell to museums, setting up whole scenes in caves around Hastings' coast. Big names like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle are casually thrown in as co-conspirators until eventually it's difficult to tell what's made up from what really happened. Rees parodies the unreliable nature of historical narrative by presenting outrageous liars in an almost heroic light. Even Gareth's late best friend Mike is posthumously praised for his ability to exaggerate to make events sound more entertaining. Whilst searingly relevant, this constant blurring of the lines between fact and fiction does get a little exhausting, a constant reminder of the post-truth world in which we're living.

'When I once told (my children) that the moon's gravity caused the ocean's tides they found the concept bizarre and far less believable than the myth of Father Christmas and his army of elf slaves. They had not yet erected a barrier between perceived reality and fantasy, if there were such a thing at all.'

The moment you turn the first page to find a contents list with chapter titles like 'The Eel with a Head the Size of an Armchair,' you know this is going to be no ordinary reading experience. The eclectic format features photos as well as text and even a full-length comic strip. There are frequent laugh-out-loud funny moments and Rees' genius lies very much in his comedic details and observations. I'm not sure what a 'smoke dried Tudor cat' even is but found the image of a pair on display in a pub highly amusing. The author isn't afraid to tackle the big questions about death, parallel universes and how the choices we make impact other lives and the world around us. Men with metal detectors, disappearing lollipop ladies, and Rod Hull and Emu are amongst the many unexpected characters to make an appearance in this exhilarating, truly original and highly entertaining alternative history of Hastings.

'It's all coming to the surface.'

About the publisher

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About the Reviewer

Becky Danks is an avid reader, creative writer, book reviewer, and dog lover. She is currently organising a UK and Ireland-wide poetry and short story competition for adults and children for a London charity. Follow her on Twitter: @BeckyD123 or visit her website: www.beckydanks.com