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CLASSICS

Russell Hoban

The Medusa Frequency



PENGUIN MODERN CLASSICS

The Medusa Frequency

‘Russell Hoban is one of our greatest, timeless novelists’
The Times

‘Russell Hoban is our Ur-novelist, a maverick voice that is like no other. He can take themes that seem too devastating for contemplation and turn them into allegories in which wry, sad humour is married to quite extraordinary powers of imagery and linguistic fertility’ *Sunday Telegraph*

‘Hoban is unclassifiable, thank goodness. He is an original; imaginative and inventive. Though some of his work has been compared with that of Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, he is his own man, working his own vein of magical fantasy’ *Sunday Times*

‘No matter how far Hoban’s imagination goes, his books are always convincing, beautifully written and charged with narrative momentum’ *Observer*

‘Russell Hoban is the most intimate of geniuses. His unique, oblique, animistic viewpoint on love and the world has won him critical panegyrics and legions of devoted fans’ Tim Martin, *Independent*

‘Hoban’s books are always strange lands, full of shadows, secret corners, laughter in dark places, doors that open on to views you don’t expect. The light falls differently in his country. Things are not the way they seem, and though at times he tries to make you believe you are standing on solid ground, there’s always giddiness just beneath you’ Nicci Gerrard, *Observer*

‘Hoban excels in the clash of the physical and the metaphysical’
The Times Literary Supplement

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

On his death in 2011, *The Times* described Russell Hoban as ‘perhaps the most consistently strange writer of the late 20th century’. He thought and wrote in an extraordinary range of genres, becoming first a bestselling author of children’s books, particularly the immortal Frances stories and his first novel, *The Mouse and His Child* (1968). After its publication he continued to write for children (most notably perhaps the Captain Najork books and *The Marzipan Pig* with Quentin Blake), but focused most of his energies on a sequence of wonderful novels, which began with *The Lion of Boaz-Jachin and Jachin-Boaz* (1973) and ended with *Angelica Lost and Found* (2010). He also wrote the libretto for Harrison Birtwistle’s opera *The Second Mrs Kong* (1994).

His novels were wildly various, but share his obsession with objects, animals, specific works of art and pieces of music, his love of words and sense of humour. Penguin Modern Classics publishes his first eight novels: *The Lion of Boaz-Jachin and Jachin-Boaz*, *Kleinzeit*, *Turtle Diary*, *Riddley Walker*, *Pilgermann*, *The Medusa Frequency*, *Fremder* and *Mr Rinyo-Clacton’s Offer*.

RUSSELL HOBAN

The Medusa Frequency



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To Gundel

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ZIP . . . POW . . . LOVES ME

George Herriman, 'Krazy Kat'

Same old story, same old song;
it goes all right till it goes all wrong.

Will Jennings, 'Same Old Story (Same Old Song)'

I

Art Is a Tough Business

I was shocked but I can't honestly say I was surprised when Istvan Fallok told me about Gösta Kraken. It could have been any one of us; art is a tough business.

I'm going to tell about what happened last November and early December. Whether it'll be of any use to anybody I don't know but I've been getting it all down on paper as it happened so here it is, beginning with the night when the flyer came through the letterbox.

First Appearance of the Kraken

NNVSNU TSRUNGH, said the green letters on the monitor screen of my Apple II computer that rainy night in November. This screen isn't like a piece of paper; the words come out of a green dancing and the excitation of phosphors. I'm the one who makes the words appear but I don't always know who or what is speaking.

Who's there? I said letter by letter on the screen.

No answer.

Speak up, I said. What are you afraid of?

NNVSNU TSRUNGH, it said.

You're afraid that you exist.

NNVSNU NNGH.

You don't want to exist.

NNVSNU RRNDU TS'IRNH TS'IRNH TS'IRNH NNGRH.

An existence such as yours is too dreadful to be thought of. Is this the Kraken speaking?

DON'T THINK OF ME. IF YOU THINK OF ME I MAY BE REAL.
LET ME NOT BE REAL.

What was I to say to it? The reality of the Kraken isn't up to me, I'm not the final authority on such things. With its first words this creature was already as real to me as anything else; it was more real than the VAT figures that had appeared on this same screen the day before. The Customs and Excise Office isn't real to me in any way that really matters, it isn't

there at three o'clock in the morning when the words come out of the green dancing and the singing comes from thousands of miles away.

No, what passes for reality seems to me mostly a load of old rubbish invented by not very inventive minds. The reality that interests me is strange and flickering and haunting. For example:

987 A SUPERB FIGURE OF A FISHERGIRL WITH A GIANT SQUID, the girl reclining with a contented expression as she embraces the huge beast, whose skin is stippled, giving a mottled effect, its eyes inlaid in pearl with dark pupils, the group forming a long flat composition, the details are finely carved and the slightly worn ivory has a remarkable colour and patina, *early 19th century*. Ex F. Meinertzhagen collection. This is a magnificent Netsuke of a smooth compact form, ideal for its use.

There's a drawing of it in the book as well: the fishergirl entranced as with her left hand she grips the mantle of the squid, whose eyes look up at her. She speaks to me, this fishergirl, and not simply as herself. Letter by letter words appear on the monitor screen:

Always in the dream are
the sea and the dream of the sea.
In the dream I am the fishergirl in
the twining embrace of the giant squid,
its dark eyes are on me as
it penetrates and inseminates me.

The giant squid has been dreaming of me age-long,
rising in the black night,
rising in the moony ocean night and never, never finding,

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never until now finding
the mystery of me so long dreamt of, so long lusted after.
Eurydice, whispers the long sea, Eurydice, Eurydice, and the
giant squid is frightened by the beauty of me, it trembles as
it holds me in its twined embrace.

At three o'clock in the morning Eurydice is bound to come into it. After all, why did I sit here like a telegrapher at a lost outpost if not to receive messages from everywhere about the lost Eurydice who was never mine to begin with but whom I lamented and sought continually both professionally and amateurishly. This is not a digression. Where I am at three o'clock in the morning – and by now every hour is three o'clock in the morning – there are no digressions, it's all one thing.

LET ME NOT BE REAL, the Kraken said again.

There was nothing I could do about that and I didn't know what to say so I said nothing.

YOU DON'T TELL ME THAT I'M NOT REAL.

Again I didn't say anything.

THEN I AM REAL. I HAVE BEEN THOUGHT OF TOO MANY TIMES UNTIL THERE HAS COME TO BE SUCH A THING AS I, THE KRAKEN, LIVING WHERE I LIVE AND PERCIPIENT ALWAYS.

Tell me about your beginning.

IN THE BEGINNING OF ALL THINGS WAS MY BEGINNING, IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE TERROR.

Whose was the terror?

THE TERROR WAS ITSELF AND THE TERROR WAS OF ITSELF. THERE WAS NOTHING ELSE, THERE WAS NO ONE TO HOLD THE TERROR, THERE WAS ONLY THE TERROR.

Terror of what?

TERROR OF WHAT MIGHT BE, OF UNIVERSES AND WORLDS THAT MIGHT BE, AND THE ILLUSION OF TIME.

What came then?

FROM THE TERROR CAME THE AWARENESS OF IT. FROM THE TERROR CAME A TREMBLING AND A WRINKLING OF THE SILENCE THAT LISTENED.

Nothing else? No one to listen with the silence?

NO ONE TO LISTEN, NO ONE TO HOLD THE TERROR; ONLY THE ELECTRIC SILENCE THAT SHOOK AND WRINKLED AS IT BECAME YOUR MIND.

My mind holding the terror, my mind alone.

YOUR MIND HOLDING THE TERROR BUT IT WAS TOO MUCH FOR YOU TO HOLD ALONE. YOU THOUGHT OF ME AND YOU MADE ME HOLD THE TERROR THAT YOU COULD NOT HOLD. YOU THINK OF ME STILL, YOU THINK OF ME NOW.

I have always thought of you, have always had you in mind, have always heard the circles of your terror widening in the deeps. I think of you as the great cephalopod, ancient of the deeps, great thinking head in the blackness of the ultimate deep. I think of you as the Kraken. Even little children have an idea of you, they draw a great head with all the limbs growing out of it.

I AM THE KRAKEN, ANCIENT OF THE DEEPS, MONSTROUS CEPHALOPOD, GREAT HEAD AT THE CENTRE OF MY MILES OF WRITHING TENTACLES IN THE BLACKNESS OF THE ULTIMATE DEEP; THE KRAKEN, MY DARK MIND WILD WITH THE TERROR OF ITSELF, SHUDDERING, WRITHING, AFRAID TO SLEEP, AFRAID TO DREAM BUT SLEEPING AGE-LONG AND DREAMING OF IMMENSITIES, OF BURSTINGS AND TRANSITIONS AND UNIMAGINABLE STATES OF BEING, DREAMING A UNIVERSE IN WHICH THERE IS SUCH A THING AS THE KRAKEN, DREAMING THAT I AM THE KRAKEN.

Will you show yourself to me?

I WILL SHOW MYSELF TO YOU IN SEVERAL WAYS AND WITH SEVERAL FACES.

Have you so many faces?

The Kraken said no more that night. But Eurydice has said

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in those three-o'clock-in-the-morning dancing green phosphors:

Of me the terror, I squatted and gave birth:
born of me the Kraken in its terror
at the bottom of the sea. Born of me
its terror of Eurydice.