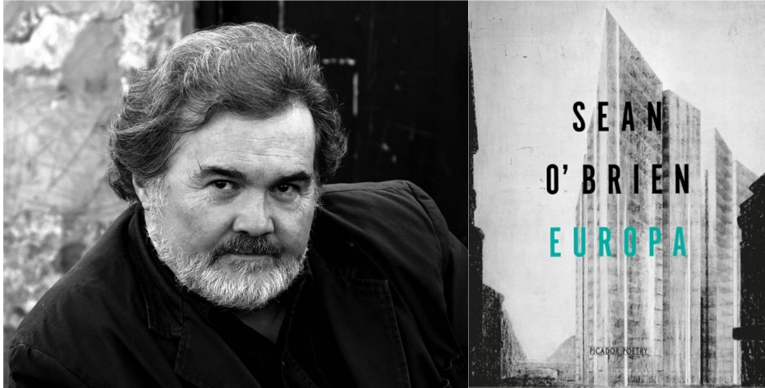


Europa

by Sean O'Brien

(Picador)



Sean O'Brien was born in London in 1952 but grew up in Hull and now lives in Newcastle. His nine poetry collections include *The Indoor Park*, *The Frighteners* (both Bloodaxe) and *HMS Glasshouse and Ghost Train* (both OUP). With *Downriver* (2001) he then moved to Picador for his subsequent collections. [The Drowned Book](#) (2007) won the T. S. Eliot Prize and the Forward Poetry Prize for Best Collection for the third time. [November](#) (2011) was shortlisted for both the T S Eliot Prize and the Forward Prize for Best Collection. His *Collected Poems* appeared in 2012. [The Beautiful Librarians](#) (2015), was a Poetry Book Society Choice. *Europa* is his ninth collection. He is Professor of Creative Writing at Newcastle University.

Reviews

Europa, Sean O'Brien's ninth collection of poems, is a timely and necessary book. Europe is not a place we can choose to leave: it is also a shared heritage and an age-old state of being, a place where our common dreams, visions and nightmares recur and mutate. In placing our present crises in the context of an imaginative past, O'Brien show how our futures will be determined by what we choose to understand of our own European identity – as well as what we remember and forget of our shared history. *Europa* is a magisterial, grave and lyric work of from one of the finest poets of the age: it shows not just a Europe haunted by disaster and the threat of apocalypse, but an England where the shadows lengthen and multiply even in its most familiar and domestic corners. *Europa*, the poet reminds us, shapes the fate of everyone in these islands – even those of us who insist that they live elsewhere. (*The Poetry Book Society*)

The generation born from 1945 to the early 1960's had it all. State-paid-for Liberal Humanities education; The Beatles, Tamla Motown, David Bowie and T. Rex, all the amusement of the cranky avant-garde; the most incredible sense of entitlement and progress being made. And we blew it. Maybe it was circumstances beyond our control but it happened on our watch and we blew it. And it is too late to complain now. Poetry is a very unlikely instrument to use to set it right but it can be a powerful way of resigning oneself to a game that has been played out and gone. (*David Green books blog*)

Zorn

Somewhere in the house, I howl.
Of this much I am certain, though
These days I no longer hear.
It's only me again. Meanwhile
I watch and do not watch
The evening freight trains pull away
In almost perfect silence, gliding
At the low, inexorable speed
It's tempting if not yet compulsory
To think is that of history,
A word we'd long supposed
Was exiled to the snowfield of itself,
When all the time the patient trains
Were overhauling us to fill
This yard as big as Luxembourg,
Locked down in night and fog.
But what do I know? Only that
They roll into the tunnel, after which
No further reference is made.
There is a pause. It's me again,
There in the attic, the cellar,
Sealed between the walls, a howling
Absence of the sort you often find
In older houses such as this.
If I were me I shouldn't dwell on it
But learn to count my blessings,
Carefully and often, just in case.

Now you reassure yourselves that yes,
You were the first of the prescient few
Who could tell where it leads, from a dust-devil
Spinning in a noon-hot market-place,
A detail seen from space as merely true
Among the infinitely lone and level
Sands where time begins and ends.
My infinitely clever friends,
If being right is its own reward
Your ironic composure will not save
Your skin from the wrath of the vengeful horde
Or your bones from an unmarked grave.

Discussion Ideas

- If any of you know what the word 'zorn' means, stay quiet for a bit and let those who don't know speculate its definition. Now reveal the meaning or look it up. How close did you get?
- What does 'night and fog' refer to in 'Zorn'? Think again about the title of the poem – is it a word or a person? Is this a war poem?
- Googling '2018 Goddess' brings up links to goddess braids hairstyles, a Goddess Festival in California and the 10k Goddess Race in Australia. Is Sean O'Brien's a modern or a timeless goddess? Why might she be leaving the scene?
- 'Friday the Thirteenth' is a slasher-with-a-hint-of-zombie movie from 1980. Does this poem share any qualities with its filmic namesake? The strapline on the movie poster read 'They were warned ... they are doomed ... and on Friday 13th, nothing will save them'. Can a poem have a strapline? What would the strapline for this poem be?
- What dead can you spot here? There are references to Coleridge, Eliot, Shelley in the poem – anybody else? Who might the 'host of the righteous' and the 'vengeful hordes' be?

Other books by Sean O'Brien

- 1983: *The Indoor Park* (Bloodaxe)
- 1987: *The Frighteners* (Bloodaxe)
- 1989: *Boundary Beach* (Ulsterman Publications)
- 1991: *HMS Glasshouse* (Oxford University Press)
- 1993: *A Rarity* (Carnivorous Arpeggio)
- 1995: *Ghost Train* (Oxford University Press)
- 1995: *Penguin Modern Poets 5* (with Simon Armitage and Tony Harrison) (Penguin)
- 1997: *The Ideology* (Smith/Doorstop)
- 2001: *Downriver* (Picador)
- 2002: *Cousin Coat: Selected Poems 1976–2001* (Picador)

- 2002: *Rivers* (with John Kinsella and Peter Porter) (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Australia)
- 2006: *Inferno: a verse version of Dante's Inferno* (Picador)
- 2007: *The Drowned Book* (Picador)
- 2009: *Night Train* (with artist Birtley Aris) (Flambard Press)^[9]
- 2011: *November* (Picador)
- 2015: *The Beautiful Librarians* (Picador)

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- Glyn Maxwell
- Kathleen Jamie
- Ben Wilkinson

Sean O'Brien online

[Sean at the Poetry Archive](#)