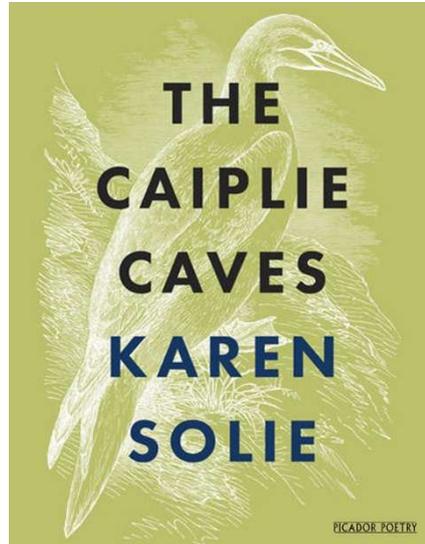


# *The Caiplie Caves* by Karen Solie



Karen Solie was born in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. She is the author of three collections of poems including *Short Haul Engine* (2001), *Pigeon* (2009), which won the Canadian Griffin Poetry Prize, and *The Living Option: Selected Poems* (2013). She was International Writer-in-Residence at the University of St Andrews in 2011 and is an Associate Director for the Banff Centre's Writing Studio program. Her first UK collection, *The Living Option: Selected Poems*, was published by Bloodaxe in 2013 and her second is *The Caiplie Caves* (Picador 2019). She lives in Toronto, but is currently teaching at the Writing School at Manchester Metropolitan University.

## Reviews

"Toronto-based writer Karen Solie, described by Michael Hofmann as 'the one by whom the language lives', has done it again. *The Caiplie Caves* is both an extraordinary and an unsettling accomplishment. Solie begins by setting out a brief history of the caves and a description of the book's protagonist of indecision, St Ethernan. Whilst the caves are still visited today, she tells us, records of St Ethernan are 'often sketched only briefly, in passing' so that his story 'resists a final resting place in the ever-expanding facility of the past'. What we do know is that Ethernan was not endowed with special powers or a supernatural conjuring ability as was common to his cohort at this time. Ethernan, by all accounts, was an ordinary man, subsisting on bread and water, who travelled to these caves and stayed there, contemplating the 'heavily birded' May Island opposite where he might, or might not, build a priory. This decision, to either live in solitude as a caved hermit, or to be active and build a communal place of worship, is the cornerstone of this probing collection; how should we, the reader, reconcile the dissident draw of both estrangement and engagement? What is our responsibility both to the world and to ourselves, and what happens when they're at odds? Does merely noticing the world do living justice?" (*Review 31*)

“Although conflicted at times, oscillating between misanthropy and lonely wistfulness, *The Caipie Caves* makes a case for choosing solitude. It is a resigned choice, resentful at times, and sometimes simmering with bitterness and anger. But it is also underlaid with sadness, stemming not from the difficulty of northern isolation, but originating instead from a collective society in a state so dire that a person would feel compelled to choose a hermetic life. In this way, the modern and the medieval collide and transcend the temporal gaps between the two narrative strands. In spite of its harshness, the remote north becomes a refuge for the brooding introspection of one wearied by the world. In becoming a part of the land where they escape, each narrator finds a new self, removed from anthropocentric society in a fraught alliance with the natural world. With this retreat into the land and self, there is a wryly optimistic takeaway that might otherwise be overlooked—that somehow, the hardships of a faceless natural world are easier to endure than those imposed by other human beings.” (The Poetry School)

### **‘A Plenitude’**

Appearing as though they originate in spiritual rather than material seed, as proof

we don’t know how to properly celebrate  
or mourn – bindweed and ox-eye daisy, cranesbill, harebell,

hare’s-foot clover, whose ideology is fragrant  
and sticky, the underside of reflection blooming

across centuries. Arguments for and against belief  
volunteering in equal profusion.

My many regrets have become the great passion of my life.  
One may also grow fond of what there isn’t

much of. Grass of Parnassus –  
and when you finally find it, it’s just okay.

But look for lies and you will see them everywhere  
like the melancholy thistle, erect spineless herb

of the sunflower family. That the eradication of desire  
promotes peace and lengthens life

is time-honoured counsel. Still, you can’t simply wait until  
you feel like it. The beauty of the champions,

bladder and sea, the tough little sea rocket,  
is their effort in spite of, I want to say, everything

though they know nothing of what we mean  
when we say *everything*; it is a sentiment referring only

to itself. Purple toadflax, common mouse ear,  
orchids, trefoils, buttercup, self-heal,

the *Adoxa moschatellina* it's too late in the year for,  
I can hardly stand to look at them.

And all identified after the fact  
but for the banks of wild roses, the poppies you loved

parked like an ambulance by the barley field.

### **'The Meridian'**

Fishers, who mapped Kilrenny steeple  
as a marker to direct them at sea, call it St. Irnie  
to this day. I can't bring you back.  
My imagination's not enough. Or maybe

it was lost with you offshore between the rigs,  
between domestic and foreign sectors, its beacon  
unattended. A loved thing shared and doubled  
is in solitude never whole again.

the harbour's full of sightsee daycruisers,  
private recreational vessels, a few trawlers left  
to cross swords for Talisman Energy's odd jobs  
on their bellies in the mud. When the sea,

even knowing what it knows, dares flood back in here  
with whom will I watch flat fish rummaging  
in the sediment, the Canadian sport fisherman  
in his new gear, baiting his hook with a fillet?

### **'A Lesson'**

The tide rises, a crowd returning from a stadium,  
abstract sound of innumerable specifics  
reentering the shoreline's boroughs. Wheels clatter  
on the rocks of your driveway, headlamps light the wall.  
A door opens in the place in you joy leaps to.

There's pattering in the kitchen. Close your eyes.  
What might happen this cycle has happened, and a promise kept –  
the nightmare rocks and fingery weed-beds banished –

though something more important kicking off elsewhere  
already has the water's attention. Yet again it prepares to withdraw  
even its neglect. Tidal pools are exposed,  
their smell of mortal exchanges.

Nothing exists in darkness that doesn't in the light.  
Once, this comforted you.

## Discussion Ideas

- The litany of flowers sent almost as spiritual messages in 'Plenitude' – if they're a form of prayer, what might they be a prayer for or to?
- Where is the only true simile in 'Plenitude'? What effect does its language and position have on you?
- How do fishers use a steeple as a marker doing their jobs? How does a poet use a steeple as a marker doing hers? What does this or any steeple symbolise? ('The Meridian')
- Who is teaching the lesson in 'A Lesson'? Who and what is being taught? Does it teach you too?
- Looking at these three of Karen's poems as examples, what do you think of her technique of ending poems?

## Other books by Karen Solie

*Short Haul Engine* (Brick Books, 2001)

*The Road In Is Not the Same Road Out* (House of Anansi Press, 2015)

## If you liked Karen Solie, try ...

- Michael Hofmann
- Kathleen Jamie
- Jean Sprackland

## Karen Solie online

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karen\\_Solie](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karen_Solie)