Transcript: 21 Revolutions Podcast

Podcast: Jen Hadfield: Infestation - A Memoir of pests

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**Laura Dolan:**

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**Jen Hadfield**

I'm Jen Hadfield I'm a poet and sometimes artist and I do a little bit of supply work at some of Shetland's schools.

One of the library staff was um both very encouraging and very enthusiastic about putting together a secret mystery book parcel to send up to me in Shetland um and we had a little conversation about what kind of uh books I might get a kick out of um and I think I sent her an email saying something like I was um really into foraging for wild food which I am um and I love ceramics and I'm quite interested in um women in science uh so I threw out a few possible areas I researched but I wasn't quite sure what I'd light up on then the quite heavy quite exciting book parcel arrived one day um and there was a really interesting array of books in there from a fantastic book talking about women's inventions um from now let me think was it the 18th century something like that up to the contemporary day and there were lots of amazingly varied contraptions that women had dreamed up there um there was a few books of um travellers’ tales and memoirs of um traveling communities and life and traveling communities uh which I really enjoyed um and there was this fantastic hippie kind of book from I can't remember what years this from the 70s um by Alicia Bay Laurel um all about how to live in the world how to live on the earth and it's all um it's all handwriting um and there's lots of amazing diagrams and incredibly useful information about um well how to build your own stove out of a trash can and how to bake bread in um old um you know baked beans cans effectively how to build a kiln and how to repel all kinds of household pests um and this is a thing that really rang a bell with me um I have a a grandmother in Canada who's lived in a variety of quite rural places and also in the less rural places in Canada you've still got just quite a lot more creatures making their selves at home in your house as with many women of that generation she's a feeling that if you have mice or rats then you're somehow fundamentally morally dirty or um it's some kind of a moral judgment on you if you have mice um according to her so I wanted to write something that tapped into that creepiness and um you know the the pragmatics of how to get rid of mice um but also tapping in a little bit to that moral anxiety about it I ended up really broadening out into all kinds of other pests some of them some of the the bits in my piece are um referring to a pest that I haven't really consolidated in my mind it's something scary and disease carrying and it's probably got a lot of legs um so I quite enjoyed that and I had quite a lot to say about that so I wrote three pieces um and they're all quite kind of choppy-changey and hopefully there's a sense of um I don't know slight confusion in the piece I hope.

"Infestation: A Memoir of Pests" (plus two dubious but complementary theories of the universe, gratis.)

Breathing very carefully through my mouth I baited and set the little line of traps we laid a votive dish of something sweet in every room crunchy or smooth it doesn't matter in the basement we found a rotting salmon they loved compost, burst drains, wet clothes the colour blue. My God they were just everywhere a cloud so thick you could cut a door in it in your ears and up around your ankles something biblical a nest at the bottom of a sleeping-bag another in the underwear drawer I pulled the Afghan blanket over my head and sweated out the night I heard them tap-dancing under the floor.

It was right there on the mantle piece next to the Japanese Buddha big enough to sting through corduroy I don't know who was more surprised that squatting brute puffed up with blood, of course they carry fever under their hood this old dear in her nightie waving a frying pan over her head. Stalemate. Then I ate up the nuts myself, starting at the door when I got to the fireplace I chose the poker it hung on by the skin of its teeth fell back in my lap sort of chill while I damn near died; I screamed blue murder it had given something up a bogle or it's spores. Everything was sticky, the handles, the floors, cats all shaking their tacky paws, "you get down here this minute John Robertson" I said "I've got a bone to pick with you"

My latest half-baked theory is that each squashed fly must open a fly shaped instability in the universe a vacuum that necessarily pulls another into existence a buzzing knot yanked through the lining of your concentration. From the window of the desk I pass a fly into the custody of the warm bright wind and fog and its instantaneous replacement fat as a hedgehog struggles from the vortex mired in pollen to drop onto the centre-spread of this hippie book, brailing the page with jazz hands.

It rubs its wrists together (a yolken rain falling) it chafes a fore and a middle leg. Juvenile gulls like broken crocks throwing back their crashed spouts and arched handles to sick up laughter broken pumps wheezing above dry wells gulls like pitchers of stale water on every lumb a prophetic alert a moral judgment canticling the passing of the essy-kert preserving the continuum.

**Laura Dolan**

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