

TLC Showcase

PEN FACTOR SPECIAL

Sponsored by Kobo Writing Life at The Literary Conference 2014

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Introduction to *The Words In My Hand*

The Words In My Hand tells the untold story of the hidden love between French philosopher René Descartes and Dutch maid, Helena Jans van der Strom – a story almost entirely missing from histories or biographies of Descartes. Set against the backdrop of the Scientific Revolution, it is a time of change but also of great danger, when heretics and transgressors are brutally punished. Descartes is a Catholic, Helena, Calvinist; he is a man of means, she is a maid. Reputation is all. Their affair could ruin them.

Weaving together the story of Descartes' quest for reason with Helena's struggle for literacy, the novel follows Helena's journey across the Dutch Republic as she tries to keep their young daughter secret. The novel is told in the first person from Helena's point of view, revealing her place in Descartes' life and contribution to his work. The reader sees Descartes before he was published, before he was 'great'. Snowflakes, rainbows, soot, salt, candles, dust, eels – Helena's life, Descartes' work. Through Helena's story, everyday objects are transformed into new ways of learning. Their worlds overlap yet remain sharply divided; the only way of being together, is to live unseen. Helena and Descartes face a terrible tragedy, and ultimately have to decide if their love is possible at all.

Descartes writes letters; Helena writes on the palm of her hand. Her words stay 'glued on her tongue'; his are carried out into the world by his possessive valet, Limousin, connecting to a wider intellectual network through the French monk, Mersenne. Without setting out explicitly to do so, the novel became a means to examine Helena's invisibility – then and now.

The Words In My Hand is my first novel, and has occupied me for the last two years. I lost six months at the start of last year, as my daughter was unwell, and did not write a word. I thought, *I can't write this book*, and pushed it as far away from me as I possibly could. But the characters refused to be quiet; if anything, Helena's voice grew stronger. At the end of August 2013, I went back to it. I had a deadline and was determined to meet it (the novel was supported by a grant from Arts Council England). I wrote day after day and late into the night, and produced a first draft by the end of September. In January this year, I substantially rewrote the first third of the book, and by the end of March, the editing was finished.

In little more than a week, I have found representation from an agent – Veronique Baxter, of David Higham Associates – and my novel will be landing on editors’ desks any day now. That’s hugely exciting, but I am taking nothing for granted. I know there are no guarantees that anyone will want it. I think I have written a good book, something worthwhile, the best book I could. I hope I have helped make Helena visible again and revealed a deeper truth about Descartes too.

Winning Pen Factor has given me a tremendous boost, as I knew I was up against some very tough competition on the shortlist. The experience was a good one, and tremendously affirming. I had complete strangers come up to me afterwards and tell me how much they enjoyed the reading. The competition was worth entering just for that.

The prize is a year’s mentorship with The Literary Consultancy, and I am very much looking forward to working with TLC on my second novel over the course of the year ahead!

Extract from *The Words in My Hand*, by Guinevere Glasfurd

Amsterdam, 1635

Ice

I turned about the room, toe to toe, making the smallest circle. What I wanted was not there. His clock, his papers, his quill glass – emptied, cleared, gone. I had seen this room empty before and had not minded; now it only magnified my loss. I did not want a coin, or token, or keepsake. I wanted words, some note – but there was none. He'd gone without taking his leave. He'd taken what was his with him.

I pulled back the sheets he'd kicked down the bed, the mattress cold under my hand. *Even nothing has a shape*, I thought, *it is what was, what could have been*.

'Helena?' Mr Sergeant called from downstairs, with a sharpness I'd not heard before. 'Helena?'

I lifted my hand and curled my fingers into my palm.

'Helena!' Louder, this time, something brittle in him, something about to break.

I grasped the bannister, steadied myself, and went downstairs. I blinked back tears, and wiped my eyes with the side of my hand. The front door stood open. All the heat had gone from the house. I walked across the tiles I had cleaned yesterday. I did what I always did – went onto tiptoe so I would not leave a mark. Then I stopped. I could see the Limousin with Mr Sergeant outside, waiting. I pressed my feet flat to the floor, raised my head, carried on walking and did not look down. When they saw me approach, they parted and stepped to one side. Neither said a word. There was no need – I knew what they were thinking.

The driver looked at me as he adjusted the bridle, then pitched my case onto the carriage roof. 'Only feathers in there?' he joked, still looking, not blinking.

The horses shuffled and champed on their bits. I bowed my head and climbed in, closing the door behind me with a click. On either seat was a folded blanket and on the floor a wicker basket with food. I lifted the cover: apples, two large loaves of

bread, a cheese, some cured meats – enough food for two or three days, perhaps more. Too much food. The sight of it made me feel sick.

The driver addressed the Limousin. 'We will make Amersfoort first, then Apeldoorn. Deventer is no more than a day further on, if the route is clear. The IJssel is all ice. With this winter...' he shook his head. 'You would do better to wait...'

The Limousin snorted. 'Some things won't wait.'

I glanced up as the Limousin climbed into the carriage and settled himself in the seat opposite. He smelled of tobacco and wine; a sour, unwashed smell from the night before.

'Deventer?' I tried to keep the panic out of my voice.

He took a blanket and laid it across his knees, and motioned at me to do the same. I took the other blanket, unfolding cold over my lap; it sank through my skirts into my legs. I turned to look back as the carriage lurched forwards, but Mr Sergeant had gone. There was no going back; it was ended. The loss stopped my breath. The Limousin crossed his arms in front of him, and turned his face to one side, the grey light falling flat on his cheek. He must have felt my look because his gaze flicked back to me.

'What?'

'Aren't we going to Leiden?'

'Leiden?' His laugh was knowing; his mouth pulled into a smile almost.

'I don't have anyone in Deventer. The Monsieur knows that.'

He inspected his fingernails, or his knuckles maybe. He shook his head at some private thought.

'Limousin, *please*, there's been a mistake.'

'No mistake. The Monsieur made no mention of Leiden. We're going to Deventer.' He looked at me and his look said, *I know what there is to know*. In this carriage he was keeper, lord, master. Then his gaze hardened, and slid to my stomach.

His legs lolled apart. I tucked my legs up against the seat but his knees knocked against mine as the carriage threaded its way out of the city. *Deventer* – I tried to place it in my mind, but the map I pictured dissolved at the edges, the roads and

canals faded into a blank. Sickness welled in me and burned my throat. I lunged forwards and grabbed at the door.

'Let me out!'

The Limousin pulled my fingers away from the handle. 'Sit back. *Sit back.*' He pushed against my shoulder with the flat of his hand. He was stronger than he looked. The skin around his mouth had whitened; red spots pricked his cheeks. 'All you have to do is sit there and be still.'

I rubbed my shoulder where he had pushed me. Prinsengracht passed by, the view squeezed into a small square of window. A thin grey light fell against the shuttered-up houses; window after window, blank and cold, blind to me. The carriage began to gather speed. We were already on the outskirts of the city. Each house we passed was one further away from Westermarkt. To see the city slip away like this was more than I could bear. Deventer, Deventer, Deventer, Deventer – the word beat into my head with the clatter of hooves.

'What will I tell my mother!' The words were out before I could stop them. I covered my face with my hands and the tears I had held back all morning tipped from my eyes. My breath came in sobs.

The Limousin stared out of the window, unblinking, as if pained by my tears and crying. 'You should pray for forgiveness, Helena.'

I squeezed my eyes tight and clasped my hands together as he began to pray. But I did not know this prayer of his. I moved my mouth, trying to form words I did not know, shaping sounds I had never heard.

'O Vierge des vierges, ma mère, à toi ce que je viens; devant toi je suis le pécheur repentant...ne méprisez pas mes prières, mais ta miséricorde entendre et répondez-moi...'

God forgive me, God forgive me, God forgive me...

When I looked up again, we were out of the city. I clutched my stomach as I felt a flutter against my hand.

Oh God, *Monsieur*, what will become of us?

Amsterdam, 1634

Books

I noticed him in glances; the curve of his shoulder; the heavy black ribbons on his shoes; the downward sweep of his eyelashes. I noticed his hands, delicate and smooth, his fingers stained with ink. A writer's hands, smaller than mine; pale hands that made me want to hide my rough hands away.

He had a way of touching his mouth, resting a finger against his lips as he thought, in no hurry to speak. I had to be careful not to stare, not to catch his attention. I knew better than to disturb him. I'd heard him shout at his valet, the Limousin, when he went in unannounced. I did not want to be shouted at. But how to be quiet and make it all still when the water pump squeaked and the windows rattled? Even a clean sheet, when I shook it across the bed, made a horrible *crack*. It made me wince. The more I winced, the noisier it seemed, this terrible hurdy-gurdying at the heart of Mr Sergeant's house. I went everywhere on tiptoe, as though afraid I'd trip on my shadow.

Betje wanted to know all about him, *the Monsieur*. He's French, I told her. Her eyes widened, then narrowed, and when she couldn't get anything more from me, she nipped me hard. *Monsieur*, she said, in a way that made us tip forwards and laugh.

In the two years I had been with Mr Sergeant, I had not known a lodger like him. He was different, even before he arrived. Lodgers always stayed in one of the rooms at the back of the house. Those rooms faced north. Even on the brightest day, the light felt pinched in. Being in there was like peeping out at the day from under a blanket.

Some weeks before he arrived, and to be sure the Monsieur would be *properly accommodated*, Mr Sergeant had come with me to look at the rooms – something he never involved himself with. It was the first inkling I'd had that the Monsieur deserved more, better, than previous lodgers; that something of Mr Sergeant's reputation was tied up with this man.

He humphed up the stairs, not used to so many at once. 'Our French guest is a thinking man, Helena. He needs quiet, somewhere to work. He was quite specific on that, *une chambre tranquille*, or *tranquette* or *trompette* or something. Then there is the *valet* – he will need a room too...'

I drew my shawl round my shoulders. The room had been shut for months. As the door swung open, cold air rushed out.

'Oh dear,' he said, as he went in. 'Oh dear, oh dear.'

It was, in truth, a glum little room. He looked as though he had bitten into a lemon, having expected peach.

I didn't know what he hoped for – that the room could be miraculously swagged with velvet and satin, and a half dozen duck-down pillows, pillows he did not have, be piled high on the bed? I could not imagine anyone being able to think other than dark thoughts in here. The gloominess drew in like fog. I was sure it was foggy in France too, but that was no reason to make him relive the experience daily.

Father had travelled. He'd told me what France was like. He went away for weeks at a time, on a trading ship to Bordeaux. He brought my mother a yellow shawl – said he'd had it spun from sunshine he'd found in a French field. It was her favourite and she wore it until the day he did not return. Then she folded it away, and the sun seemed to slip away with it too.

Mr Sergeant turned on one heel and led the way out to the larger room at the front of the house where he kept his books. He had very many books – too many for me to count. There were books in trunks and baskets, books tied in bundles, books spilling from boxes – some even on shelves, but there were not shelves for them all.

I squinted against the brightness. Mr Sergeant blew out his cheeks; he rocked back on his heels, then centred his weight. His frown lifted as a thought revealed itself, and he tapped my forehead with his knuckles. 'Gloom is not conducive to good thinking, Helena. Monsieur Descartes shall have this room; valet and books at the back.'

I nodded, too surprised to say anything. When I had suggested moving the books before, he had always said no. These books *deserved* this room.

'All we need now is for them to finish that church and be done with that racket.'

Bang, bang, crack went hammers on stone outside as if to underline his point. A roar went up as a plank fell from a scaffold.

He tutted. 'Who would have thought God's work could be so noisy? I'd not have this on Herengracht.'

Mr Sergeant wishing for a house on Herengracht would be like me wishing for a tulip on my birthday. Merchants lived on Herengracht. Booksellers lived where they could. But I liked Mr Sergeant's house, it was tucked away down a side street, and faced an open square. There had been a market here until it was announced a church would be built. *Westerkerk*. It was the finest church in Holland. Work still continued to the outside and around the square.

I still couldn't decide whether Mr Sergeant's house leaned to the left, or the windows leaned to the right. Not long after I arrived, I stood on the pavement and tilted my head one way then the other, as if that would help set it right. Mr Sergeant laughed when he saw me. He had gout, and walked with a limp. What a funny combination they made – this tall, lop-sided Dutch house and this round, limping English man – neither with a straight line between them.

Once the front room had been cleared of books, and the arrival date confirmed, Mr Sergeant wasted no time in sharing his news. When Mr Veldman came by, he was hardly through the door before Mr Sergeant was on him. They were rivals in the book selling trade, not that I heard either admit it. Mr Veldman specialised in travel books and maps, *books of the world*, he called them, and Mr Sergeant in poetry and moral tracts of an *edifying nature*. But when Mr Veldman called a latest acquisition a *tittle tattle tale of dubious literary merit*, Mr Sergeant refused to entertain him again until a quantity of brandy had been provided to ease the hurt and erase the insult. *We'll see whose tail has been tattled*, he said, taking a long slow sip. In the end, the jug was emptied, and Mr Sergeant sound asleep in his chair, snoring.

Mr Veldman shrugged off his cape as he took in Mr Sergeant's news. 'Descartes, *the* Descartes? *Are you mad?*'

Mr Sergeant ignored him. 'I am flattered, I admit.'

'You heard about his previous lodgings? The time not spent at the abattoir was time spent cutting up creatures – in his room. Some not even dead.'

Mr Sergeant swallowed. 'Helena, a drink for Mr Veldman.' He looked as though he needed one himself.

I folded Mr Veldman's cape over my arm and went to fetch the tray from the dresser.

'Yes, well...' Mr Veldman continued, clearly enjoying himself, 'you can imagine...'

I steadied the glasses on the tray. Mr Sergeant had paled.

'And,' he added, shaking his head as if telling a cautionary tale, 'he throws animals out of the window – live animals, that is. All in the name of his *method*.'

'Well...' said Mr Sergeant, 'Lord Huygens thinks he is brilliant. That is enough for me.'

Mr Veldman covered his eyes, as though shading them, then let his hand fall.

'Dazzling. Perhaps we could arrange a *soirée* **with the brilliant Descartes?**'

'A *soirée*?' Mr Sergeant shifted from one foot to the other. 'I expect Monsieur Descartes will be preoccupied. Almost certainly. Very busy.'

Mr Veldman arched his eyebrows at the refusal. He took a glass from the tray. 'He's an avowed Catholic, you know...'

Mr Sergeant waved the remark away. 'Tolerance is all. We two should know that. What he does in his time, is his affair.'

'I'd like to know what he thinks of Galileo...but, no matter. I doubt he will publish, not now.'

'Patience, Veldman, patience. There is more to the man, I believe.'

Mr Veldman laughed, '*Impatience* more like, and arrogance, and ambition...a temper too, I've heard.'

Mr Sergeant took a sip from his glass, then cleared his throat, 'It will be an honour to have him here. With me.'

'I defer to your judgement on these matters – as always.' He made a small bow.

'I think you are jealous, Veldman,' Mr Sergeant teased.

Mr Veldman laughed once more. 'You must allow an ageing man his small jealousies now and then.' He held the glass up to the light. 'Very pretty,' he said, looking through the glass at me.

'Come, Mr Veldman, if jealousies are what please you, let me show you what I have brought from Utrecht.' Mr Sergeant steered Mr Veldman towards his study. When the door had closed, I took the glasses away to wash them. Mr Veldman's glass I washed twice.

Flowers

The Minister at Noorderkerk said terrible things about the French – their frills and ruffles, and silks and satins, and ribbons and lace. It was hard to imagine a man wearing such things. Would our French guest have a collection of wigs? And drink wine before breakfast and brandy with it? A knot tightened in my stomach when I thought about it. As the day of his arrival approached, I felt I had been pitched over a bridge on a runaway horse.

On the morning he was due, Mr Sergeant sent me to the flower market to buy flowers for the house.

'Mind you buy *French* flowers,' he said, then shut himself in his study without another word. *French* flowers?

'Excuse me.' I raised my hand to catch the attention of the stall keeper. 'Do you have any French flowers?'

'*French* flowers?' She wiped her hands on her apron as she studied me.

I nodded. I looked at the flowers she had for sale – peonies and daisies and honeysuckle and roses – bunched in bright bundles. There didn't seem to be a house along the length of Herengracht without peonies in the window. *Look at us*, they seemed to say. I did not like flowers like that, flowers that never opened, that stayed shut tight in fists. They could be rotten right at the heart and you would not know. Some shed their petals at the gentlest touch, as though made only of wilting and sadness. I would buy roses instead. And something French.

About the Writer

My short fiction has appeared in Mslexia, The Scotsman and in a collection from The National Galleries of Scotland. My first novel, *The Words in my Hand*, was written with the support of a grant from Arts Council England.

I have an MA Creative Writing (Distinction) from Anglia Ruskin University. In 2012, I was mentored under the Escalator scheme, Writers' Centre Norwich. I work collaboratively with artists in the UK and South Africa and my work has been funded under the Artists' International Development Fund, (Arts Council England and the British Council).

I manage the *Words and Women* Twitter feed, a voluntary organisation representing women writers in the East of England.

Previously, I have worked for BBC History (Online) and in a variety of roles in higher education.

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PEN FACTOR RUNNERS-UP

From the Mountains Descended Night by L.E. Yates (2nd Place)

How do you unravel a huge mistake you made when you were young? In Westminster, 1792, the dying James Macpherson is grappling with this question. His translations of the Gaelic *Poems of Ossian*, which propelled him to fame and fortune in 1760s, are about to be investigated as forgeries by his political enemies. Worse still, the aging cynic Macpherson has quarrelled over this affair with his seventeen year old son, Charles, who is now in grave danger as British forces attack Tippoo Sultan at Seringapatam.

Macpherson knows that if he summons the courage to tell Charles the truth about the notorious affair of the *Poems of Ossian* then his son will return to England. So, he sets out to write him an honest account but Macpherson, a manipulative rogue, who by his own account hasn't been 'on speaking terms with the truth' these last four decades, finds this confession harder than he could ever have imagined.

Macpherson's explosive revelations include his intrigues with the Prime Minister, how he wrestled the famous Red Book out of the arms of a dying man, and his terrible struggle as, starving and desolate in Edinburgh, he betrayed the legacy of his dead mother in order to create the *Poems of Ossian*. As his health fails, he writes more and more frantically in the desperate hope that Charles will return from India to defend him against the enemies closing in on him.

About L.E. Yates

I grew up in Manchester during the 1980s but have lived in Norwich since I came to study on the Creative Writing MA at UEA in 2005. My short stories have appeared in a range of anthologies from *Parenthesis* to *Tessellate* and I have been an Associate Lecturer in Creative Writing at the Open University since 2007.

I won a place on the Escalator scheme in 2013 and was awarded an Arts Council grant to complete my first novel, *From the Mountains Descended Night*. This explores one of the biggest literary scandals of the eighteenth century – the notorious forger James Macpherson and *The Poems of Ossian*.

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The Boy a Thousand Years Wide by David Spon-Smith (3rd Place)

The *Boy a Thousand Years Wide* is an adventure story, a quest in every sense of the word. It's got battles, journeys and some very colourful characters held within its pages. It is at heart a tale of love and betrayal, of loyalty and friendship, of loss and freedom. It charts the awakenings of humanity in its seventeen year old protagonist; Baxter Wright.

Set in a future ravaged by mankind and plagued by Reapers, Baxter Wright, an orphan, knows nothing more of life than mourning the death of his family and surviving the cold, merciless streets of the Borough, one of humanity's last strongholds

When the giant Pit-fighter Trent and the mysterious stranger Milton enter his life, Baxter flees the confines of the Borough, setting off on a voyage of self-discovery. For unbeknown to Baxter he hides a secret, a secret that has the power to uncover the origins of the Reapers and decide the fate of mankind once and for all.

Baxter soon discovers that he is a Watcher; half angel and half human and that he has to be claimed by his angel father before he is corrupted or killed by a demon. Lead by Milton, Trent and their loyal dog Alfie, Baxter sets off on an adventure that will change his life forever.

About David Spon-Smith

They say life can sometimes imitate art, so when Baxter Wright, the hero of my story, battles forces that would bring about the destruction of mankind, I take comfort in the fact that I only have to work in advertising to keep a roof over my head.

Advertising is what you might call a 'lively' profession. I've met plenty of characters along the way, some good, some ugly and some very, very bad. A few of them can be found living and breathing inside the pages of my first novel, *The Boy a Thousand Years Wide*. Who knows, one day they might get a chance to read it and wonder if the similarly psychotic tendencies of Moloch, the story's antagonist, were based upon their own behaviours all those years ago.

As for me, I'm 34 and live in London with my wife Sharon and work for the *Guardian*.

