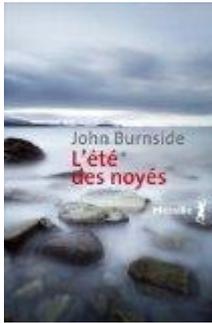


**Interview intégrale de John Burnside pour Babelio à propos de son roman *The Summer of Drownings*, traduit en français sous le titre *L'été des noyés* (Mercure de France), ainsi que de ses lectures.**



**1. Your novel takes place in Norway. What connections do you have with this country ? Do Norwegian legends bear similarities with the Scottish ones ?**

I first went to northern Norway in 1996, to attend a conference. Flying in over the islands around Troms, I felt immediately at home: it was July, so there was the white nights, the land was so beautiful, the sea dark and the islands. I have always had a weakness for islands. Later, I came back every year for several years and the island of Kvaløya, to which my friend Dag Andersson had introduced me, became a focal point, not just for the novel, but also for other writing. Some Norwegian myths are similar to Scottish stories, others are very different. I was drawn by both, a sense of familiarity and strangeness at the same time.

**2. The novel deals with a mysterious creature called the Huldra. What is this creature and what got you interested in it ?**

The huldra is a beautiful woman, often portrayed as wearing a red dress, who meets young men in the countryside – usually the woods and fields, occasionally the shore – and lures them to their deaths. She is very beautiful and the men are beguiled by her, but if they could look behind her they would see something else – in the Norwegian story, a cow's tail, in the Swedish a kind of Sartrean nothingness. In other words, she represents illusion and its powers: beauty can deceive us and sometimes it draws us in directions we should not follow, but cannot help pursuing.

**3. The novel opens with the death of two brothers. Missing children was a central topic of your previous novel [Glisten](#). Is this an issue you care about ?**

It is a terrible notion, the thing that scares me most. Missing children, especially when there is no explanation, (as in [Glisten](#)). On the other hand, there is something poignant about, say the Lost Boys in *Peter Pan* that raises questions about boyhood and manhood that I find intriguing and difficult. In a sense, I think all boys get lost in growing up: they become men, which is not the kindest of fates.

**4. The characters remain somewhat mysterious all throughout the novel. How could you describe the unusual relation that ties Liv and her mother together ?**

Well, Liv loves her mother because – well, it's her mother, and she just does. In a sense, she has to. But her mother's love for her is so unconventional – and so clearly secondary to her art work – that Liv finds it hard to understand. Angelika hopes, I think, that she will inspire Liv, by her example, to live on her own terms in a world that tries so hard to make us live on its terms, (and if becoming a man is not a kind fate, becoming a woman is, perhaps, worse). This is something Liv finds difficult – but when she does find her own 'world', Angelika doesn't understand that either. So I think there is a case of baffled love – and fear, on Liv's part, that Angelika will somehow slip from the perfection she maintains, possibly by falling in love with Frank. Something Angelika, who I want readers to think of as a passionate woman, would never do.

**5. It is difficult to classify *Summer of Drowning* in a particular genre. In which one would you classify the novel yourself ?**

I dislike classifications in the mild way that we can still dislike things we no longer think about. I would, if forced, call it a novel – but I wouldn't worry much about genre.

**6. Your novel deals a lot with adolescence. So much so that one could easily believe that teenage illusions and challenges is the main topic. Would you say this interpretation makes sense ? Can we see in this book a metaphor for adolescence ?**

Yes, I think so. For me, Liv is someone who stands in that in-between place, that half-way house between knowing what she doesn't want – for sure – and still being unaware of what she does. She doesn't want the usual teenage stuff – shopping, venial friends, 'boys' and she doesn't want the usual things grown-ups do – job, marriage etc – but she hasn't worked out what she does want – or if it is even possible to want anything, have come so far in dismissing the usual wants and needs.

***John Burnside and his readings***

**1. Which book made you want to become a writer ?**

Rudyard Kipling: *The Light That Failed*. I was fourteen, on a visit home to Scotland, after we had moved south, and I thought Kipling had got life just right. I still love that book. Less fashionable now, but still perceptive, in a somewhat romantic way.

**2. Which author made you want to stop writing (because he had too many remarkable qualities) ?**

I don't think it works quite like that, but reading Proust certainly taught me that genius was something other than anything I, or most anybody else, could do. (I think most of us start out hoping to grow into something like geniuses – even if we don't use that word. It would be odd if one didn't hope for something remarkable - not for fame or money or whatever, but for the sheer life-affirming qualities of doing something wonderful).

### **3. What was your first great literary discovery ?**

Lewis Carroll. We had only a few books in our house; my mother bought me the Alice books and that was it. I read them over and over, only really moving on when I discovered the Corby library at around fourteen. After that, it was a feast for a while: whoever had stocked that library knew that working class people like us could enjoy things like 'the classics' and poetry. He or she didn't just assume we wanted Westerns and romances.

### **4. Which book have you read the most ?**

*Moby Dick*. There is something elemental about that book that I need to go back to over and over.

### **5. Which book are you ashamed you haven't read yet ?**

I was a voracious reader as a teenager – I was isolated, anti-social, bewildered by the cruel conventions that adults seemed determined to perpetuate, (school, marriage, working in a job) so I read. When I didn't read I got into fights, so everyone as happy to push me into a corner with a book and leave me alone. So I've read far too much, in a way. I'm – ashamed isn't the right word, but something it – that I read so much too quickly, and missed things. Nobody has any time any more, but if I had, I'd go back and re-read the entire contents of the Corby library, then everything in my first college library.

### **6. Which neglected treasure of literature would you like to introduce our members to ?**

*The Stories* of Breece D'J Pancake. This is an extraordinary book of great stories by an author who died too young. It has been translated into French recently as *Qu'arrivera-t-il au bois sec ?* by Véronique Beghain.

### **7. Which classic book is overrated, according to you ?**

I can't think of a classic book that is overrated. When something endures, it's usually because there is something to find in it. Sometimes this involves more often than others. Usually, though, it's current books that get overrated – because of hype, I guess. And networking, self-publicity – at which some writers are better than others...

### **8. What is your favorite quote from literature ?**

"It is not down in any map; true places never are." From *Moby Dick*, of course.

### **9. Which book are you currently reading ?**

I am reading *On Silbury Hill*, by Adam Thorpe.

