

The Quickening Maze by Adam Foulds.
Jonathan Cape 2009.

Few of the poets from the 19th century capture the magic of natural England better than John Clare. Sadly, the poet's life was a deeply troubled one as he wrestled with his inner demons, principally those caused by depression, and in spite of enjoying phenomenal success as a poet early in his life, being lionised by fellow poets, marrying and fathering nine children, his last twenty seven years were spent in asylums, first that of High Beech in Epping Forest and latterly, for a total of 23 years, in Northampton General Lunatic Asylum.

Adam Foulds' short but highly atmospheric book is set during Clare's time in High Beech and his struggles with his depression and his sanity. He captures the poet's inner struggles and occasionally evokes his madness in an alarmingly real way.

But the Quickening Maze is also populated by a number of other characters, not least the owner of the asylum Dr Matthew Allen, whose inner life is also quite tortured as he flits from scheme to scheme, wrestling with difficult family relationships and professional failures with his inmates: Alfred Tennyson and his brother Septimus (also a resident at High Beech), at the former of whom Allen's daughter Hannah unsuccessfully sets her hat, Allen's long-suffering wife Eliza and his sinister and brutish assistant Stockdale.

All are caught in the vortex that surrounds High Beech and from which John Clare ultimately walks out in search of his lost love. The reader ends The Quickening Maze full of sadness at a creative life destroyed, but grateful for such a powerful evocation of a key part of John Clare's life by a very fine writer.

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