

Learning Resources:

Poem

The Blue Boat

By Kathleen Jamie

National Poetry Day
in Scotland

Thursday
8 October 2015

Poems about LIGHT

The poet and her work

Kathleen Jamie is a poet, essayist and travel writer. She was born on 13 May 1962 in Renfrewshire but her family moved to Currie, just outside Edinburgh, when she was young. Her father worked as an accountant and her mother was employed in a solicitor's office. Jamie began writing poetry when she was a teenager. She has described her decision to become a writer as 'a negative decision', a reaction against the prospect of a life working in an office job. Her first collection, *Black Spiders*, was released in 1982, when she was just twenty.

As she has developed as a poet, Jamie has engaged with various themes. In her collections *The Way We Live* (1987) and *The Queen of Sheba* (1994), the reader is alerted to Jamie's status as a 'woman poet' and a 'Scottish poet'. She often expresses her discomfort with such 'tribal' labels, and the feeling of writing in a voice which operates on behalf of a group of people. It is unsurprising then, that these themes are addressed and then sloughed. Her keen interest in the natural world moved to the fore in *The Tree House* (2004), which won the Forward Prize for Best Collection and the Scottish Arts Council Book of the Year Award.

Throughout her career, Jamie has held several writer-in-residence posts, including one at the University of Dundee, and from 1999 taught creative writing in the School of English at the University of St Andrews. She became Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Stirling in 2011.

The Poem

'The Blue Boat' by Kathleen Jamie published in *The Tree House* (Picador, 2004)

Choose from the following activities to build your own Stage 3 or 4 poetry lessons.

Opening up the poem (reading and discussion) *LIT 3-04a/LIT4-04a, LIT 3-06a/LIT4-06a, LIT3-07a/LIT4-07a, LIT 3-16a/LIT 4-16a, LIT 3-17a/LIT 4-17a*

Key questions

- This poem features two different types of light – can you identify them?
- What time of day does this poem take place?
- A lantern is 'slung' from the mast. What kind of action is meant by 'slung'? What does this suggest about the lantern and everything it represents?
- 'our old idea of the soul' is a very powerful image – what could it be?
- 'gilded in mussel shell' is an unexpected image – what effects does it have? (Think about the joint themes of light and old.)

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Research

- For millennia, sailors have navigated by the stars. Find out more about how the constellations and stars have helped to guide us.
- The boat 'edges towards the northern night' as the daylight fades, setting up rhymes that are suggestive of the Northern Lights. What can you find out about the Aurora Borealis? Have you or anyone you know ever seen them? <http://www.northernlightscentre.ca/northernlights.html>

Climbing inside the poem (performance and discussion) EXA 3-01a/EXA 4-01a, LIT 3-02a/LIT 4-02a, LIT 3-08a/LIT 4-08a, LIT 3-10a/LIT 4-10a

- Performance: there are hopeful and gentle qualities in this poem that can be conveyed in well paced individual readings and performances - rehearse different ways of reading this poem aloud.
- Class discussion: through this poem we are encouraged to think about 'our old idea of the soul'. What are the old ideas about the soul? Are new ideas of the soul different? You may want to discuss this through religious, philosophical or scientific principles.

Building on the poem (writing) LIT 3-23a/LIT 4-23a, LIT 3-25a/LIT 4-25a, LIT 3-26a/LIT 4-26a

- Write a poem in which you explore or present your old or new ideas of the soul.
- If you were 'journeying in a blue boat/gilded in mussel shell', where would you go? What would happen? Write this narrative as a poem, maybe even a dramatic monologue.
- Dusk ('Late daylight') and dawn are moments of transition and a frequent inspiration or image in poetry and prose. Write a poem set at dusk - what has just happened? What might happen as darkness falls?

Further reading and links

Selected poetry by Kathleen Jamie

Black Spiders (The Salamander Press, 1982)

A Flame in Your Heart, with Andrew Greig (Bloodaxe, 1987)

The Way We Live (Bloodaxe, 1987)

The Queen of Sheba (Bloodaxe, 1994)

Jizzen (Picador, 1999)

Mr and Mrs Scotland Are Dead: poems 1980-1994, selected by Lillias Fraser (Bloodaxe, 2002)

The Tree House (Picador, 2004)

Waterlight: selected poems (Graywolf Press, 2007)

The Overhaul (Picador, 2012)

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Websites

<https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/poets/kathleen-jamie>

<http://literature.britishcouncil.org/kathleen-jamie>

<http://www.poetryarchive.org/poet/kathleen-jamie>

<http://www.transculturalwriting.com/radiophonics/contents/writersonwriting/kathleenjamie/>