*Noah*, Penelope Shuttle (Broken Sleep)

*Noah* is a fascinating slim collection of poems birthed out of Old English dictionaries that belonged to Penelope Shuttle's husband Peter Redgrove and a medieval mystery play about Noah's Ark. The poems describe 'Captain Noah's' engagement with the animals he rescues from the deluge God sends, and which he packs into a wooden ark, although there are occasional sideways visits to Cornwall, archaeology and mythological creatures such as the phoenix.

The sequence starts in a fairly traditional manner, retelling the story as Noah collects the beasts, makes speeches and directs things, but by the end of the second poem, 'Lady Eve', there is temporal disruption as Shuttle notes 'the Ark wasn't always a toy' and then compares the boat to the USS Gerald Ford, the largest aircraft carrier in the world. The same kind of slippage occurs in the next poem, 'deluge' where the loaded ark goes 'sailing past all dangers', which turn out to be historical, yet post-Biblical times, in nature.

Elsewhere, animals are the narrators of poems, whilst others describe and report what the animals are thinking and doing, or re-present 'Noah's notes'. Meanwhile, in 'firebird' the phoenix swaggers up the gangplank after a dialogue with Noah that makes me think of Pete & Dud, as does 'Noah and God: a conversation' a few pages later. Elsewhere the authenticity of the story is undercut as Shuttle notes that

 the pseudo-archaeologists have been searching
 for the Ark since 339 C.E.

 even though there's no sign of a flood
 in the geological record
 ('Archa Noah')

and as 'Noah Theatre' comes to an end, after the narrative is explained at length, when Shuttle tells us that Noah takes his wife

 away on a mere promise from god
 who has never spoken a word to her,
 taken into exile because of a stupid hunch her old man had about the weather.

Other poems re-interpret the story in light of both contemporaneous and later stories, nothing that 'Noah's Wyf' is not named in the traditional Scriptures but *is* in an excluded text, where she is Emzara. There are also poems about animals no longer known to us, poems that make use of other texts, including some in Old English, and poems written aslant to the story, my favourite being 'although the text of the play is lost', which is assembled from records of payment in Hull for 'acting and equipment'.

In the final poem, 'exodus', all the animals exit from the ark 'in a noisy joyous rout, failing to thank Noah for saving their lives, more intent on 'claim[ing] what is theirs', which is 'our earth / the queen of planets'. Shuttle suggests however, that in this day and age our world may now be ' a charred warning' to any aliens 'nudging through our galaxy'.

The book ends with some brief footnotes about source material, and also a fascinating short text, 'Behind the Poem', previously written for the Poetry Society, where Shuttle talks about 'reading various poems translated from the Anglo-Saxon, and pootling about through some Old English poems and tracts', in addition to explaining her writing and drafting process. I like the osmosis that has allowed different vocabularies and ideas into these poems, just as I agree with her assessment of bible stories being magic and rich, 'mystical, not theology.'

This is a delightful, original and playful reversioning, one where Emzara 'want[s] another ark'

 with a drawing room
 and a fernery
 no smelly animals
 and the complete absence of Noah
 ('That she hadde a shipe hirself allone')

and Noah, 'on his five-hundredth birthday', prays to the doubting animals:

 pray for me Lord Lion
 pray for us Holy Ghost Koala

Amen to that.

Rupert Loydell